

EDUCATION OF THE DEPRIVED

ANGLOPHONE CAMEROON LITERARY DRAMA
anglophone cameroon literary drama

Shadrach A. Ambanasom



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Preface

For over a decade now socio-political developments in Cameroon, including the liberalization of the press, have led to an unprecedented proliferation of political, journalistic and imaginative writings. Availing themselves of their new-found freedom of expression, Cameroonians in general are forcefully articulating their views more than even before, and creative writers, in particular, are artistically recording our intimate and painful experience in the ongoing endeavour to make sense of our socio-political environment; they are mapping out, through images and symbols, the peculiar contour of our collective Cameroonian soul.

What observers have noticed, with regard to Anglophone Cameroon imaginative writing, however, is that there are few significant critical works to match the burgeoning creative literature. While in the 1970s there was a cry concerning the scarcity of imaginative works by Anglophone Cameroonians, the complaint now, at the turn of the 21st century, is that there is a dearth of critical literature capable of catapulting, on to the international literary scene, the Anglophone Cameroon literature being written.

It is therefore hoped that *Education of the Deprived* will meet the expectations of those who have expressed the wish to see an aspect of Anglophone Cameroon literature treated critically and substantially in book form. Our effort may well stir up reactions, negative or otherwise. If so, then this will be a welcome development for the health of African literary criticism. Action and reactions are what we need for growth; thesis and antithesis are dialectical dynamics necessary for a healthy synthesis.

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Introduction

It is a fact of history that since 1961, the year of the union between the former French and British Cameroons, English and French bilingualism became a national policy in the Republic of Cameroon. At the turn of the 21st century the Anglophone Cameroonians number at least 4 million out of a total population of 15 million Cameroonians, constituting thus a linguistic and cultural minority. Until recently national and international discussions of Cameroon literature have often limited themselves to Francophone Cameroonian authors, with only a token mention of those of English expression. (See Lyonga *et al* 1993:9)

Yet, a cursory glance at any valid current bibliography of Anglophone Cameroonian literature will reveal that though it cannot match its Francophone counterpart, Cameroon Anglophone literature has been in existence since the late 1950s, about the same period when famous Francophone Cameroonian novelists like Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono first published their major works. Thus, since the late fifties, Cameroon Anglophone literature has been growing steadily. In the words of Emmanuel F. Doh (1993:82) 'Although still very young, Anglophone Cameroon Literature is forging on strong and the future is certainly promising.' And literary historians would agree with the view that the last decade of the 20th century witnessed a dramatic upsurge of creative activity by Anglophone writers; for the period saw the publication of many novels, plays and poems. All but four of the thirteen plays discussed in this book were written in that decade; and, even then, these are only some of the dramas published then or before.

This book is a slight revision and expansion of its original version when first produced in a monographic form in 1994. Since then it has been used by students, literary researchers, and scholars with interest in Cameroon literature of English expression, both within and without Cameroon. I have been made to understand that it is one of my most quoted unpublished works. Some academics have urged me to publish it, or, at least, provide a good cover for it. But, until now, I have been hesitant to do so.

The main criterion for selecting the thirteen Anglophone Cameroonian plays analysed here is their political content, or the high degree accorded the theme of authority or power in them. They include Victor Epie Ngome's *What God Has Put Asunder*; Bole Butake's *Lake God, And Palm Wine Will Flow*; *Shoes and Four Men in arms*, *The Survivors*, and *Dance of the Vampires*; Bate Besong's *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie*, *Beasts of No Nation*, *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, *Change Waka & His Man Sawa Boy*, *Once Upon Great Lepers* and *The Banquet*; and N. John Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers*. These playwrights – Victor Epie Ngome, Bole Butake, Bate Besong and John Nkengasong – can be said to be ‘writers in politics’, to borrow a phrase from Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and in their politics they side with the people, the down-trodden and the left-out, subtly giving them a sense of direction. Herein lies the education of the deprived.

Some of what goes on in their works is a reflection, in images and symbols, of the general drama unfolding within the Cameroonian society in particular and the African continent in general; a rough picture of the diverse fortunes known by the Cameroonian and African societies as they struggle to develop culturally, politically and economically, especially after political independence from colonizing European powers; and, above all, a mirror of the innermost recesses of the minds of our most sensitive artists as they, in their own attempt to contribute towards the harmony, stability, progress and prosperity of these societies, imaginatively and subtly propose means of achieving solutions to problems plaguing them. The dramatic works are ‘therefore an indicator of an essential aspect of our spiritual evolution; more, the principal channel through which the collective adventure of the new African [or Cameroonian] is being given expression’. (Irele 1981:35)

All of this confirms a Marxist axiom: the social basis of literature; that literature is a product of the socio-historical conditions of the people producing it. And the second Marxist truism made apparent by the thirteen plays analysed is the view that no major work of literature is conceived in an ideological vacuum; or that every significant work of art issues from an ideological conception of the world. And the imaginative world of the playwrights is one consisting of two antagonistic aesthetics locked in a fierce combat: the aesthetic of oppression and exploitation versus that of struggle and deliverance.

In the 'Foreword' to Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1983), Richard Shaull says:

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Shaull 1983:15)

In accordance with their forward-looking vision the four Anglophone playwrights are giving the people an education not for blind conformity but for critical consciousness, an education aimed at making them critically conscious so that they can react creatively to social stimuli and transform their socio-political environment for the better. These writers therefore espouse a progressive aesthetic of art.

In analyzing their works it makes sense, therefore, to correlate them to their social background in order to see how each author's purpose and temperament arise from the broader social context of his dramaturgy. The background material in Chapter One, therefore, serves this function. As a consequence the critical viewpoint adopted in this book is that of the Socio-Artistic Approach. 'Socio' because the plays are examined from a sociologically informed point of view since they are products of socio-historical conditions; and 'artistic' because a valid appreciation of any literary work must take into account the issue of artistry.

The sociological aspect of the approach encompasses subject matter, themes, relevant cultural and social references that may throw more light on the literary work, and the social significance of the work itself. We believe that great literature invariably makes reference to human life, that it often deals with social and moral issues, and that it cannot just be but must somehow relate to an aspect of human life. One agrees with T.S. Eliot that 'The greatness of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards.' (Quoted in Irele 1981:40)

The artistic dimension concerns the artistic qualities of the work of art in question. A good novel, play or poem, a work of human creation, the brain-child of a talented writer is, by our definition, a veritable work of art. And any that is considered successful should possess aesthetic qualities. Therefore, a critical examination of a novel, a play, or a poem, should take into consideration the novelistic, dramatic, or poetic features as well as the devices of technique, and linguistic choices the writer has made use of to achieve technical coherence.

Another laconic but less precise name for the approach is matter and manner, respectively standing for the examination of the work's themes and social significance as well as the appraisal of the author's dramatic technique. As I see it, as far as an effective analysis of a work of literature is concerned – be it a novel, a poem, a play or a short story – I simply call its subject matter and themes, matter; and its language and technique, or its artistry, manner. In my view criticism is not literary criticism which dwells solely on themes and meaning to the exclusion of technique and language, or vice versa. It is my firm conviction that a serious literary analysis must involve both matter and manner, the central pair that animate my own approach to any work of the imagination that I have analysed.¹

Students of literature would agree that to attempt to appreciate literature many critics have devised what may be dubbed by others as new-fangled theories and approaches to account for literary phenomena. In doing so some have remained essentially in the literary domain, but others have found their way to literary appreciation through related disciplines like linguistics, sociology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, Marxism, etc. What one would like to suggest to fellow critics of Anglophone Cameroon creative works and other aspirants to that critical enterprise is that they are welcome to devise whatever critical approaches they feel are suitable for the apprehension of these works. But they should endeavour to define

1. At the level of practical criticism I have illustrated this approach in the following monographs: *Socio-Artistic Criticism of the African Novel* 1991; *From African Roots: A Study of Five African Poets*, 1993; *The Dregs of Humanity: A Study of Three 'A' Level Literature Texts* 1996; and in my recently published work *The Radical Romantics: An Introduction*, 2001.

and simplify the terms of their approaches, remembering that, as critics, their role is to shed some light on aspects of literary art that might have eluded other readers; their effort is to elucidate, rather than complicate, literary phenomena.

No single approach is valid for all works. No matter its claims and supposed validity, one should not carry a single approach blindly to a work of art; it is rather the work that calls forth the type of approach suitable for its apprehension. An approach that is only remotely relevant to a work of art may mislead its conceiver to condemn the creative writer for the wrong crime; it may force the critic to judge and crucify the artist for what he never set out to do in the first place.

Without being prescriptive the Socio-Artistic approach can be generally applied to works of dramatic and novelistic genres and, reasonably, to works of poetry. But depending on their peculiar content, the psychological disposition or ideological class origin of their authors, some works of art are more amenable to 'technical' critical theories than others. This is the case with Bate Besong's *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* which, while generally lending itself to the Socio-Artistic approach, can also be more 'technically' appreciated with the help of Marxist Criticism because its conception has been influenced by a socialist vision of the world.

Pointedly, an imaginative work, in its unique composition and structure of verbal expressions, will generally dictate the nature of the critical tools or aspects of critical approaches most appropriate for its apprehension. The critic's tools are his weapons at different times; and in hunting imagery, a weapon presupposes a hunter on the one hand, and the game to be killed on the other. The weapon may range from a broomstick to an automatic rifle, and the game from a fly to an elephant.

Now when a fly presents itself, the hunter uses a broomstick to bring it down; when a rat shows up, he uses a stick; when a bird comes his way, a catapult is enough. In the same way a gun is appropriate for an antelope, and an automatic rifle for an elephant. Let the weapon match the animal. It makes no sense to face the elephant with a broomstick, nor with a rifle to bring down a fly. Let the language suit the content, let the manner match the matter.

The quantity and quality of Anglophone Cameroon creative writing is on the rise, and there is the need on the part of Anglophone critics of these works to school themselves and hone their tools for the task that is inevitably theirs. Some have asserted that the future of Cameroon literature is Anglophone, a hypothesis yet to be confirmed or disconfirmed. In any case, the time has come for us to make and not to mar that literature; the moment has come for us, critics and creators, to set the pace for what tomorrow may well be the great Anglophone Cameroon literary tradition.

Chapter One

The Socio-Political Background to Anglophone Cameroon Literary Drama

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and then, man and woman. He created them, enjoining them to multiply and fill the earth, dominate and domesticate it. In other words God gave original man full rights over his environment, over nature. And ever since man has multiplied many times, and has been wrestling, ever more relentlessly, with nature to satisfy his needs. He has been struggling incessantly for food, clothing and shelter.

But since no single human being, no matter how talented or versatile, can produce alone all that he needs, men, with their various gifts and endowments, naturally enter into interdependent relationships of economic production¹. Some produce these goods, or render these services, and others those goods, or those services; and the totality of the relations of economic production of goods and services makes up the crucial economic foundation for the development of every society.

On this foundation a political structure, a state of law, arises to give legitimacy to these economic relations, to govern, guide or control the behaviour of people within this particular polity. But because he who talks politics talks power and economics, power in sharing resources, usually scarce resources, the one with political power has a decisive say in the conflicting power as to who gets what, when, where, and how much. Here, for example, is how Che Tumasang Alfred (2001:xii-xiii) views the material side of political power:

There is a Mankon proverb to the effect that if your brother is up a plum tree you will surely eat the black ones. Meaning that if you have a brother in a power position you will be sure of all kinds of benefits. In our Cameroonian society, power position means political power. It is political power that determines any other power because given such power, relatives, friends and well-wishers can consider their troubles over. In the civil service promotions come easy; appointments into higher

office come easily; scholarships to study abroad are theirs just for the asking, no matter how little they deserve them; for those in business, the most lucrative contracts are placed at their disposal. Even in families where a brother or sister has merely smelt political power, life has changed for the better – permanently. Political power has become synonymous with success. It is the greatest wish of every family, therefore, to give its son or daughter political power.

It is certainly for this reason that the late President Kwame Nkrumah is often quoted as saying something to this effect: 'Seek ye first the political kingdom and all other things will be given to you.' It is surely out of this selfish desire to be constantly provided with the good things of life that many African heads of state, after seeking and obtaining political power, go all the way to fortify themselves in order to retain this power for as long as possible. And it is a measure of their inordinate desires that a few of them, well into their nineties, may have gone down in the Guinness Book of Records as the longest-serving heads of state in the world, still alive and kicking². Probably out of the same motivation, perhaps with less selfishness, at least in principle, the exploited but conscientised masses of many a society seek to overthrow dictators, seize power and hand it to the people so that critical political and economic decisions can be carried out for the good of the greatest majority.

The people in our theoretical society express themselves not only in political and economic terms but, above all, through songs, music, dance, clothing and art in general. They have a language, thanks to which they express themselves verbally as well as through their literature, written or oral. In other words, man, as a social being, is not only politically and economically prone; he is even more culturally so.

Now if we take an aspect of culture like literature we can say this much about it: That the broad subject matter of literature is man and nature; that is, man in his daily struggle to make sense of nature, of his environment. The latter can be either his natural, geographical environment, or his economic, social and cultural

environment. Since man's existence is both spatial and temporal, since he not only lives in space but he equally lives in time, at a specific period, from year to year with modifications in his fortunes wrought by the vicissitudes of time, literature embodies history as well. Thus saying that literature deals with man and nature, we are saying that literature deals with life, imagined real life.

In view of this fact, is it not then absurd to hear some people say that creative writers ought not to write on politics; that politics should not be the subject matter of literature? Of course, politics is a central fact of life. And if we grant that literature deals with life, then that central aspect of it should naturally occasionally, or even constantly, come up in literature. Indeed, talking of creative writers in this regard, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981: preface), with wisdom and *éclat*, has expressed the issue so well in a pithy quote: 'Every writer is a writer in politics.'

Thanks to the efforts of Marxist critics, it is now a truism that literature is socially-conditioned; that it is a reflection of the spirit of the society producing it. (Eagleton 1976:vi) Of course 'reflection' here should be taken in a general sense, for we are not talking of the mechanical, photographic reflection in a scientific sense, since an artist is not a scientist dealing with exact pictures of things. Rather the artist uses his imagination to simplify, distort, and expand here and there, or break up life; but above all, he rebuilds or reconstructs it to suit his artistic purpose, to reflect his vision of life. Generally this reconstruction is realistic, if imaginary. It is an imagined real world, in the main, peopled with characters, imagined real people, who criss-cross one another's path, full-blooded people caught up in the complex web of daily existence, involving their dilemmas, hopes and frustrations.

Through their utterances, thoughts, feelings and emotions, these characters express themselves and, in the process, reveal their peculiar outlook and world-view. They say certain things in certain ways about certain communities or their world; they define and redefine themselves, their reality, their world.

In handling these characters, especially those of prose fiction, the writer artistically guides and shapes our attitudes towards them. Often he skilfully persuades us to adopt his point of view or ideological stance. Herein lies such an author's pedagogic intention.

So far we have been talking mostly of a theoretical society, which can be any society. Similarly, in talking about writers, although only briefly, we have merely generalized. But this work is not about an abstract society, nor is it concerned with writers at a general level; it is about a specific society, a specific country called Cameroon. We are concerned with a particular, modern independent African country with a complex colonial past that has profound influences on its destiny. In this country, Cameroon, of English and French bilingualism, we are dealing with a special breed of playwrights called Anglophone Cameroonian writers. They include Victor Epie Ngome, Bole Butake, Bate Besong and N. John Nkengasong. They are sensitive, progressive writers concerned, at once, with Cameroonian experiences in general, and Anglophone Cameroonian experiences in particular.

Since, as we have affirmed above, literature is socially conditioned, it becomes clear that to sufficiently apprehend a work of art, we must place it within its broad social context. This then calls for a brief review of the political history of, as well as some socio-cultural facts about, Cameroon. For they constitute the basic ingredients that constantly feed the imagination of the four Anglophone playwrights; the background information comprises essential facts transmuted into art giving the artistic works a solid basis on reality.

That said, it is a fact of colonial history that what we know today as 'Cameroon' in English, 'Cameroun' in French, and 'Kamerun' in German, was originally a German Protectorate when Gustav Nachtigal hoisted the German flag on the territory on July 14, 1884. (Le Vine *et al* 1974:25) Following that act the Germans signed treaties with the Douala traditional rulers, expropriated some of their land, and started general economic exploitation of the territory. They sent out punitive expeditions all over the area, subduing the inhabitants. They constructed schools, roads and fortresses in the territory.

However German activities in Kamerun were halted when the First World War broke out and the allied forces of Britain and France invaded Kamerun and defeated the Germans. The result of that war saw the handing over of Kamerun by the League of Nations to Britain and France as mandates, on July 20, 1922. Thereafter the partition of Kamerun took place, with the larger portion given to France and the smaller part to Britain.

Cameroun and Cameroons therefore refer respectively to the French and British parts of Cameroon. In December 1946 Cameroun became a United Nations trusteeship under French administration, while British Cameroons became a trusteeship under British administration. Britain administered British Cameroons as part of Nigeria, its larger colony. On January 1, 1960 the U.N. trusteeship came to an end and La République du Cameroun came into being as an independent state.

On February 11, 1961 the U.N. conducted a plebiscite in British Cameroons to determine their political fate. The two U.N. questions put to citizens of British Cameroons were:

- a) Do you wish to attain independence by Unification with the Independent Federation of Nigeria; or
- b) Do you wish to attain independence by Unification with the Independent Cameroun Republic?³

According to the results Southern Cameroons voted overwhelmingly to join La République du Cameroun, while the Northern Cameroon elected to join Nigeria.

On October 1, 1961 Southern Cameroons got its independence and became known as West Cameroon. On this very day the two states of West Cameroon and East Cameroon (La République du Cameroun) became re-unified to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon.

Led by Augustine Ngom Jua, Anglophone politicians insisted on the respect of the Foumban accord in which the Anglophones' minority rights were more or less safeguarded. President Ahmadou Ahidjo, not a federalist at heart, was not happy with this. He became worried when petroleum was discovered in West Cameroon in 1967, and even more so when, in that very year, the Nigerian Civil war broke out, sparked off by the secession of 'Biafra.' Therefore, the fear of a possible Anglophone secession following the Biafran example, the fear of losing valuable petroleum in the process, and the fear of the federation issue in general, pushed the French-speaking Ahidjo to come up, on May 20, 1972, with a referendum.

And after careful manipulation of the population of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, Ahidjo successfully got Cameroonians to vote by 99.9% in favour of a unitary state rather than a federation,

whereas only Anglophones had participated in the plebiscite that decided their fate on February 11, 1961. Under normal constitutional practices only Anglophones would have taken part in the 1972 referendum.

Ahidjo's ostensible reason for scrapping the federation was that it retarded the rapid development of the country. In his own words, 'the federal structures appear to be a handicap to the rapid development of ... (Cameroon) and the time has come to go further than a federal organisation'.⁴ Be that as it may, Cameroon became a unitary state, an event that fulfilled Ahidjo's secret yearning.

For President Ahidjo as for President Paul Biya who succeeded him in 1982, national unity, indeed national integration, became a primordial consideration. President Paul Biya has stated this in no uncertain terms in his book *Communal Liberalism* (1987). In the thirty objectives he set down for Cameroon, the issues of national unity and integration have the pride of place in the order of preference. Thus objectives 2 and 3 run as follows:

- In a bid to reduce clannish and regional loyalties that go against the grain of National Unity, it is important that the quarters of towns should shed their tribal coloration through a judicious town planning policy. In the same way we must strive to discourage the reproduction in miniature of any traditional ethnic political organization in our towns.
- Implementing a viable cultural integration policy is imperative in national integration. That is why CPDM (Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement) is struggling hard to eradicate any sign of tribalism, sectarianism or regionalism from any institution for training and educating young people as well as from places of worship. (Biya 1987:126).

Cameroon had been under one-party rule sine 1966, but on May 26, 1990 in Bamenda, an event that was to radically transform the face of politics in Cameroon took place. Against stiff government resistance and a massive dissuasive military force, a political party, the Social Democratic Front, SDF, of Mr. John Fru Ndi, was forcefully and successfully launched, opening the way for an eventual re-introduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon.

There are close to 200 legalised political parties in Cameroon now. With them came other legalised social organizations and freedom of the press, leading to a proliferation of newspapers, especially those of the private press that has done a great deal to propagate views contrary to those of the incumbency.

This whetted the appetite of many Cameroonians and improved their reading habits. With relative press freedom, individuals and groups began to assert their rights and to question things that they could not criticize a few months or years before. Anglophone Cameroonians began to ask serious questions relating to the constitution and to their destiny in the political union with their Francophone brothers. Numerically inferior to the Francophones, the Anglophones started talking publicly about their being marginalized with regard to economic, political, social and cultural development. The sum total of Anglophone grievances makes up what has now come to be known in Cameroon as the 'Anglophone Problem,' summed up in one word: 'marginalisation.'

In Buea, on the 2nd and 3rd April, 1993, the first ever All Anglophone Conference took place and over 5,000 Anglophones from all walks of life attended that conference to adopt a common stand with regard to constitutional issues related to their destiny in Cameroon. They crystallised their grievances against the Francophones and enshrined them in the now famous *Buea Declaration*, part of which reads as follows:-

Within these thirty-two years, our Union accord has been violated. We have been disenfranchised, marginalized, and treated with suspicion. Our interests have been disregarded. Our participation in national life has been limited to non-essential functions. Our natural resources have been ruthlessly exploited without any benefit accruing to our territory or to its people. The development of our territory has been negligible and confined to areas that directly or indirectly benefit Francophones. Through manoeuvres and manipulations, we have been reduced from partners of equal status in the Union to the status of a subjugated people. The common values, vision, and goals which we share as a people and those of our Francophone partners in

the Union are different, and clearly cannot blend within the framework of a Unitary State such as was imposed on us in 1972 ...

The so-called 'Peace Revolution' of 1972 was a ploy by Francophones to use their overwhelming majority to alter the basis of reunification for which Anglophones, and Anglophones ONLY, had voted. The 1972 referendum was illegal in so far as it was not in conformity with the procedure which the constitution itself had laid down for the amendment of its provisions and also in so far as its aim was not only to impair the Federation's unity and integrity, but to abolish the Federation itself.⁵

It is interesting to note that barely three years after reunification, in 1964, and nearly 30 years before the convening of the All Anglophone Conference, Professor Bernard Fonlon, with an uncanny sense of foresight, had prefigured what would happen. According to him unless the Francophone leadership, on whose shoulders lay the responsibility of steering Cameroon to its projected bicultural mission, was honest enough to accept the good things in the Anglo-Saxon culture, there was little chance for the survival of the latter in Cameroon.

Professor Fonlon (1964:11) complained that while West Cameroon had adopted such French practices as driving on the right, the Metric system, and stream-lining its school year to fit that of East Cameroon,

I have searched in vain for one such use or institution brought into the East through West Cameroon. Outside its own federate frontiers the influence of West Cameroon is practically nil.

By the very nature of things and by the force of circumstances, therefore, the tide is running hard against Anglo-Saxon influence in the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Thus, this much is clear that, if we leave things to chance, if the will and the positive choice of our leaders do not intervene, there is hardly any hope of worthy British uses and institutions surviving in our cultural corpus ...

In the early 1990s there was a constitutional debate going on in Cameroon. While the official government stand was for a unitary state with some measure of 'decentralization', the Anglophones, in their vast majority, stood and still stand for a federal constitutional arrangement based on the bicultural nature of the partners in the political union, with autonomous states or provinces. The Anglophones believe that only a federal constitution will guarantee their minority interests and ensure rapid economic, social and cultural development, and an equitable distribution of the natural resources and, hence, social justice.

The Anglophone federal draft constitution was the handiwork of Dr. Simon Munzu, Barrister Ekontang Elad, and Dr. Carlson Anyangwe; the government unitary draft constitution was the product of Professor Joseph Owona.

One year after the All Anglophone Conference I in Buea, the Anglophones held their All Anglophone Conference II in Bamenda from April 29 to May 1, 1994 against police and gendarme intimidation and obstruction. Despite this, the conference, shifting venues in a hide-and-seek manner to outwit the interfering government forces of law and order, was successfully held. And after reviewing, with anger, all that had transpired since they tabled their draft constitution, including the fact that the latter had simply been ignored by the government, the Anglophones at the conference reiterated their stand with regard to The Buea Declaration.

However, while the participants at the AAC II were visibly angry with perceived government behaviour, they were willing to give peace a chance. They appealed to government to revive the suspended constitutional debate so as to study the tabled Anglophone draft constitution. Nevertheless they made it clear in 'The Bamenda Proclamation' that the patience of the Anglophones was running out:

Should the government either persist in its refusal to engage in meaningful constitutional talks, or fail to engage in such talks within a reasonable time, the Anglophone Council shall so inform the Anglophone people by all suitable means. It shall thereupon proclaim the revival of the independence and sovereignty of the Anglophone territory of the Southern Cameroons and

take all measures necessary to secure, defend and preserve the independence, sovereignty and integrity of the said territory.⁶

Five years later the bluff was carried through when, in a daring, quixotic move, unparalleled in Cameroon history, Justice Ebong Alobwede seized Radio Buea for some hours on December 30, 1999 to declare the Proclamation of the Restoration of the Independence of Southern Cameroons.⁷

As we stated above these are some of the facts and issues behind the artistic creations of our playwrights; they are the framework on which the mortar and the bricks of the dramatic creations are artistically worked. But other facts and ideas feeding the imagination of the playwrights relate to the concept of neo-colonialism.

Neo-colonialism simply means new colonization. It is a recolonization by a former colonial master of a former colony through the control of the latter's economy. A former colony having attained its political independence, now assumes the political governance of itself. The colonial master has now withdrawn, packed his box and gone home. But his departure is only partial; politically and economically his influence is still very evident in the erstwhile colony.

The colonial economy that was under the direct control of the colonial master, is now only indirectly, but effectively, controlled by the departed master with the help of compradors or local intermediaries. The local directors of banks, multinational co-operations, companies, agro-industrial conglomerates, giant breweries, casinos, etc, are now Africans or Cameroonians. But their more powerful foreign partners or masters are British or French, etc.

Since international monopolistic capitalism thrives on profit making, on the accumulation of wealth, its promoters would not tolerate any situation likely to lessen their margin of profit. Often with their big money they lure the ruling political elite who take political and economic decisions in their favour or create and guarantee social conditions conducive to economic investments.

And since the neo-colonial master often pays the piper he consequently calls the tune. Thus it comes to pass that he plays a preponderant economic role in the economy of the nominally

independent state. Indeed in some cases this role is so primordial that the neo-colonial master has to be consulted for every significant economic, social and political decision that has to be carried out in the neo-colonial state. This is what Miche Garba does with Louis in Victor Epie Ngome's *What God Has Put Asunder*. Baba Toura and Akhikrikrikii in Bate Besong's plays are neo-colonial stooges whose political fortunes are unimaginable without the neo-colonial French masters. The same can be said for Traourou and his Alpine masters in Nkengasong's play.

Neo-colonialism is a fact of life in modern Africa today, a phenomenon against which many politicians and intellectuals purport to wage a war. In his book President Paul Biya (1987:140) exhorts Cameroonians to join him 'in the on-going struggle against neo-colonialism with a view to acquiring real freedom for all Cameroonians'. This fight is aimed at correcting some weaknesses within the neo-colonial state 'where various social classes had been set up, a minority which allied itself to the colonial power thus claiming exorbitant privileges, also exploited the majority of the impoverished population in the same way as the urban centres exploited the rural areas'. (*Ibid*:74).

It is a measure of the enormous difficulty of overcoming such social injustice, or lack of the political will and courage to do so that, years after such pronouncements, Anglophone playwrights like Bate Besong, Bole Butake, Victor Epie Ngome and Nkengasong are still writing, artistically castigating the political hierarchy in Cameroon, accusing them of economic exploitation, as well as political, social and cultural injustices of all sorts. Thus between theory and practice there is a wide gulf; between conception and realization there is inaction.

According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan Marxist and great African man of letters,

under neo-colonialism, the political and economic struggle assumes its true class character despite any and every attempt at ethnic mystification. It is now African workers and peasant masses, together with progressive intellectuals, patriotic elements, students ... pitted against the native ruling class and its international imperialist class allies. (Ngugi 1981:26)

Ngugi is vehement against capitalism which, according to him, is a merciless practice kept in place by unconscionable people since it is a system of theft and robbery.

Under neo-colonialism, contends Ngugi, capitalism enjoys the blessing of the administrative and judicial machinery of the government. That is, the local middlemen collaborate with the government for their own selfish interest and also for the greater interest of their foreign capitalist allies. Class division and struggle become more distinct under neo-colonialism, and the victims of capitalism are the exploited working class, deprived of the fruits of their labour.

However, these workers are not aware of their numerical strength, for were they to form a united front to combat their exploiters, the latter, by the sheer logic of their numerical inferiority, would be terribly scared. So to keep the masses from ever coming together to form such a front, the bourgeois class uses tactics of divide and rule by appealing to the African workers' ethnic loyalties, by whipping up selfish tribal sentiments.

Ngugi firmly believes that the main struggle in Africa today is the confrontation between the local and foreign capitalists, on the one hand, and the masses of the people, on the other. In this struggle the creative writers cannot afford to stand by idly but must get involved in it because the basic subject matter of literature is contained within the broad social, political, economic and cultural struggles going on in our societies. The imaginative writers and African intellectuals must be fully committed in helping the masses to bring about a new social order wherein genuine social justice would reign supreme:

... literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battle field: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics. (*Ibid*: preface)

In content and attitude the works of the four playwrights analysed in this study indicate that the authorial ideological bent has something in common with Ngugi's stance. Indeed in a more polemical mode Bate Besong reveals a similar progressive attitude when he says 'The Anglophone Cameroonian writer must never forget his origins. His writing must depict the conditions of his people expressing their spontaneous feelings of betrayal, protest and anger.' (Quoted in Ngwane 1993:36) For, treating cultural, economic and political issues pertinent to either Anglophone Cameroon in particular or all of Cameroon in general, these playwrights subtly educate, and side with, those who do not have enough access to the social products of their country, nor the material base for the adequate development of their intellectual, cultural and economic potentials.

To discover how they have done this we will examine the content of each author's work, beginning with that of Victor Epie Ngome. And we will adopt the critical approach spelt out above. This means that each of the following chapters devoted to each author will be concerned with issues and themes emerging from the work (matter), the dramatic technique (manner), and the social significance of the work.

But is there no danger that these writers, with a clear ideological stand, in trying to urge some social reactions may do so at the expense of their art? Well, we will defer an answer to this question until the end of our study when we will have made an in-depth analysis of their works, to which we now turn.

Notes

1. This is the central idea in Karl Marx's Historical Materialism, with regard to his theory of objective development. See S. H. Beer (ed.) *The Communist Manifesto* (xii-xiii).
2. President Houphouet Boigny of Ivory Coast ruled his country single-handed since independence and relinquished power only when he died close to the age of 90; Kamuzu Banda of Malawi who equally presided over the destiny of his own country single-handed, reluctantly introduced democratic elections which he lost at the age of 90+; President Mobutu of Zaire became the head of state of that country in 1965 and ruled it until he was chased out by Laurent Kabila in 1997, when already terminally ill.

3. 'Excerpts from Plebiscite Message and The Two Alternatives' reproduced for AAC II 7 – 8.
4. See Victor Julius Ngoh's article in *Cameroon Life*, May 1992, 8-13.
5. *The Buea Declaration* 2nd and 3rd April 1993, 9-10, 12-13.
6. The Bamenda Proclamation April 29th – May 1st 1994, 10-11.
7. Justice Ebong and his closest collaborators were arrested, detained and later released. He is now on self-exile in Nigeria. A school of thought holds that what appeared to the unwary as a spectacular event was only a stage-managed drama.

Chapter Two

Victor Epie Ngome – Irreconcilable Differences

Victor Epie Ngome's *What God Has Put Asunder* is, at the literal level, the story of Weka, a child brought up in an orphanage under Rev Gordon and sister Sabeth¹. When Weka reaches nubile age, two suitors ask her hand in marriage. One of them is Miche Garba, a politician, and the other, Emeka, who grew up in the orphanage together with Weka.

Despite Emeka's solid claims over Weka, as a childhood friend, Garba has his way, and Weka accepts him reluctantly. The marriage is solemnized by Rev Unor probationally, without the matrimonial rings. The couple will live together and study each other for ten years, at the end of which period, if they still desire to be husband and wife, the official ceremonies of the wedding will be conducted. During the probational period Weka discovers that Miche Garba is no good. He maltreats and neglects her; he takes over and exploits the rich cocoa farms left by her father and squanders the money on his concubines. He does not tolerate the questioning attitude of Weka who fights back, returning infidelity for infidelity.

When Weka can no longer stand Garba, she escapes with her children back to her father's compound to rebuild the dilapidated house and their shattered lives. Garba follows her there, intending to forcefully take them back to his house. The children, siding with their mother, reject him. Once more the matter is brought to the court to take a decision on. And the court's verdict is that the couple will live in physical separation though united in a 'simulated wedlock'; and that the marriage remains subject to confirmation by husband and wife only, to the exclusion of any other parties; that it will become null and void once any of the two parties objects to it; that until the confirmation is carried out under the supervision of the court, the couple will continue to live under physical separation but to show decency and decorum towards each other so as to avoid an unfortunate intervention by the court.

Several themes emerge from this play, the main one being the incompatibility of the couple, Garba and Weka. Theirs is an uneasy union. At best it is a precarious marriage; at worst, an unworkable one. First, Garba leads an adulterous life-style that has become part and parcel of him, a situation that will always militate against any conjugal felicity since it will ever force Weka to make justifiable accusations against him, or else fight infidelity with infidelity. Secondly, Garba is neglectful towards Weka and does not make any attempt to be more sensitive to her person or needs.

Worst of all, Garba is a polygamist whose other wives have been brought up on the principle of total submission to authority without questioning, a life-style inherently abhorrent to Weka whose upbringing in the orphanage has taught her to question things and not just to accept them docilely. Garba's other wives accept his decisions meekly; they willingly go along with whatever their husband decrees. In this regard Garba is even afraid that the intelligent and critical Weka may influence these women to dare to stand up to him. Thus Garba's philosophy and philandering life-style remain insurmountable obstacles in the way of genuine domestic happiness as far as Weka is concerned.

There is also the theme of economic exploitation. Garba seems to have married Weka more out of economic consideration than real affection. He takes over and exploits the cocoa farms left by Weka's father, deriving enormous profit from them but without ploughing back any of it to develop the farms, nor does he use it to attend to the physical and aesthetic needs of Weka. Rather, Garba squanders the money on his many wives and concubines.

At another level of economic exploitation we find Garba feeding fat on the assets of the co-operative society, the wealth of the nation. He is the unconscionable General Director of the co-operative society. With cheques to this or that girl, with mounting hotel bills to take care of his sensual life-style, he dips his hands, with reckless abandon, into the co-operate coffers, eventually draining them dry of cash.

There is the theme of religious aberration, and here like in Chaucer, we have satire against the Catholic Church. The way they behave towards each other indicates that Sister Sabeth and Rev. Gordon are secret lovers (14-16). Indeed by Weka's own confession Rev. Gordon has equally forced his attentions on her, actually disvirginizing her:

- Weka: ... I mean, when you used to call me up to clean the mission house, and then drag me into your bedroom.
- Gordon: (*very embarrassed*) Weka, get out of this office! Immediately!...
- Sabeth: ... But ... Weka, is ... is it true?
- Weka: What?
- Sabeth: That Reverend Gordon took you to ... I mean ... are you no longer a virgin? (*Weka drops her face, remains quiet for a while, then snatches a handkerchief from Sabeth and takes it to her eyes*). O my God! (8-9).

These then are the themes found at the literal level of the play.

But within the Cameroonian context the play and its themes have a greater allegorical significance. For the marriage metaphor relates to the political union between the Anglophone Cameroon and the Francophone part. Hence Weka stands for the former Southern Cameroons, and Garba, for La République du Cameroun; Weka's parents represent the British government that relinquished responsibility over Southern Cameroons; Rev Gordon and the orphanage stand for the U.N. trusteeship over British Cameroon; Rev Unor conducting the marriage ceremony between Garba and Weka stands for the U.N. conducting the plebiscite that ended in Southern Cameroons electing to achieve independence by joining La République du Cameroun. The Louis mentioned in the play is France, while Emeka is Nigeria. Garba's neglectful but exploitative attitude towards Weka represents the attitude of the Francophone leadership towards Anglophones in present day Cameroon, a behaviour that has come to represent a central grievance in what Anglophone Cameroonians have identified as the Anglophone Problem. Now, if one transfers the literal themes discussed above to the symbolic level, they will constitute an important aspect of the Anglophone Problem as outlined at the All Anglophone Conference in Buea and enshrined in the famous Buea Declaration.

Ngome's play is in five acts, structured in a way reminiscent of the structure of Shakespearean plays, with the story line moving gradually and steadily in Acts One and Two, and then growing increasingly to the climax in Act Three, before tapering off from

Act Four, and ending in Act Five. The play is situated squarely within traditional drama because it contains some of the characteristics of this type of drama.

As we have seen above there is a well-told story or a well-constructed plot; there are clearly developed themes and issues emerging from it; the characters are fairly developed, some of whom are complex and whose behaviour is psychologically defensible; and there is a high dialogue value revealing sharp and lively exchanges. At the symbolic level the play is a reflection, to a great extent, of the behaviour and attitudes of Francophone and Anglophone Cameroonians.

The metaphor of marriage, an ingenious theatrical device employed by the playwright, allows for two levels of meaning, the literal and the symbolic, with, of course, the latter being the more significant. Young Cameroonians without a sound knowledge of the political history of their country, together with non-Cameroonians may grasp only the literal level and yet be sufficiently satisfied with it: an exciting play on matrimonial problems and the related issues highlighted earlier; the witty exchanges between Weka and Rev Gordon, and the malapropism of Emeka will still make for a great deal of humour and interest, etc. Interesting characters like Garba, Emeka and Weka remain so even without their allegorical garb.

But the greater pleasure is reserved for the adult readers or audiences able to effect the necessary mental shift from the literal to the symbolic level of interpretation. And there is a constant mental stimulation and titillation whenever a reader or member of the audience makes a political or historical linkage between a literal character or incident and a historical one. In other words an apparently ordinary incident will be enjoyed for what it is, but one's enjoyment of it will be enhanced when one finds an exact or a close historical equivalent of it.

Yet Epie Ngome does not allow the deceptively simple framework provided by Cameroon political history to cripple his play. He does not follow history blindly. Hence the working out of the events of the play is not on a mechanical one-to-one relationship with history, so that one literal event or incident must necessarily have, at the allegorical level, an exact historical equivalent. That would undermine Ngome's fertile imagination; that would mean that he has simply transferred history on to the stage with little or no modification. Indeed the reverse is true.

Ngome's imagination has led him to write a play which, though based on history, reveals the author as very creative indeed. There are incidents and people in the play that, though true to life, are not based on specific historical personages. Some of them include Kinge, Fatou, Sani, and Fatimeh, etc. Ngome's creative imagination allows him to stretch things or people here and there, to write a realistic play with its own internal sense of logic and artistic consistency while at the same time effecting an acceptable, but not an exact, symbolic relationship with Cameroon contemporary political history. And that is as it should be, for Epie Ngome is here as a literary artist and not a historical chronicler. Besides, apart from the portions spoken by Emeka, the language of the play is English, whereas we all know that at the symbolic level, the Cameroonian reality would demand the use of both English and French.

Ngome's are solid, realistic characters, characters that after reading the play and putting away the book, the reader can still recall and fairly differentiate from one another, living characters with a capacity for growth and complexity. If we begin even with the purely ecclesiastical characters, Sister Sabeth and Rev Gordon, whom one is likely to dismiss as types because one can fairly predict how they would react to a given religious situation, we can see that they are more than just types.

True, they are clerical staff, but in some ways these are also feeble and imperfect human beings like the majority of secular humanity. They have both violated the vow of chastity; for they are secret lovers, while Rev Gordon has disvirgined Weka. Besides, Sister Sabeth and Rev Gordon, with all their European preconceptions of, and prejudices against, Africans; with all their cultural upbringing placing them as a 'superior' race over Africans, they also behave like the secular lot when they force Weka to marry against her will. And in their view what is good for civilized Europeans is not for 'primitive' Africans. All this comes out in the following exchange:

- Weka: So the choice has to be between two
 complete strangers.
- Gordon: Garba and Emeka are not such strangers
 after all. They are Africans like you. What
 do you mean?

- Sabeth: And not only African. Garba is of the Njanga clan like you, and Emeka is
- Weka: You told me that before, Sister Sabeth. But didn't you also tell me that back in your native England a girl only marries the man she loves?
- Sabeth: Yes, but that's in England.
- Gordon: Listen, Weka, it took us centuries to establish all those civilities, and this is a totally different setting. This is Africa, for God's sake.
- Weka: (*A touch of contumacy in her tone*) Of course, Reverend Gordon. How could I have forgotten that? Hasn't Sister Sabeth always reminded me how primitive we are?
- Gordon: Shut up Weka. You are being rude.
- Sabeth: And that's an insult to your education, Weka. What a shame!
- Weka: (*very angry*) May be it is. But tell me this, Reverend Gordon; when you first came to this land-of-no-civilities, weren't you told that a girl never knew a man until she got married?
- Sabeth: (*Intervening*) Weka!
- Weka: Weka! O your God! Wasn't it you, Sister Sabeth, who taught me everything I know? (7).

The tone of voice of Weka from the above utterance is certainly not that of a naïve person, the apparently innocent and guileless girl dragged by Rev Gordon to his bedroom. This is an intelligent and critical Weka, able to see through Rev Gordon's and Sister Sabeth's hypocritical garb. The same critical intelligence informs the Weka we meet standing up to her domineering husband, Garba, the Weka worldly and resourceful enough to beat Garba at his own amorous games, matching adultery with adultery.

Weka had initially demurred before she finally succumbed to the pressure to marry Garba. Once in his home, however, she fancied she could make the best of a bad situation. But this turned out to

be a serious mistake. Weka had not only been neglected but she had been maltreated and bruised, so to speak. She had fallen down and was bleeding. But she had been resilient enough to pick up herself and keep on moving. By moving back to her father's compound with her children to re-build the abandoned home and their shattered lives, Weka has refused to be daunted by obstacles. She has proven herself a woman of character.

Later she is able to remark to Emeka, with neither regret nor sentiments, that things probably would have been different with her had she married him instead of Garba. Be it as it may, things have happened the way they have, and that is the way of the world; there is no turning back the hand of the clock. Weka is therefore strong enough to accept her lot with philosophical equanimity.

Now when we come to Garba, we are in the company of an accomplished politician and a man of the world, an authoritative husband selectively sensitive to his women. While he is insensitive to Weka and her needs, he knows how to please a girl-friend and make her feel good. While he is neglectful of Weka's wants, he is attentive to those of his extra-marital lovers. For all this, however, Garba is shrewd enough to know that he cannot do without Weka's enormous wealth, the crucial, decisive factor in his choice of her as a wife in the first place. Garba is equally smart enough not to allow any divorce, for the obvious consequences on the rest of his wives.

One might think that since he does not care much about Weka, Garba would not bother if she went out with someone. But he would! For all his negligence of Weka, Garba remains naturally jealous. For example, at the Capitol, when he sees her in Sani's company, even when he himself is strolling arm-in-arm with Sani's own wife, his sense of jealousy is roused. Here we have a classic, ironical situation of switched partners.

As General Manager Garba is wasteful and unconscionable in squandering the funds of the co-operative. Very hypocritical, he preaches principles he does not practise. Like Chaucer's Pardoner, his philosophy would seem to be 'Do what I say and not what I do'; otherwise what can we make of a man we have just seen in a luxury hotel having an affair with another man's wife, shamelessly addressing a political rally in the following words:

... What happiness can there be in a home where the husband squanders the money living it up with prostitutes? (*Applause*).

Dear comrades, we have a battle to fight, and we shall win. We will defeat nepotism and sectionalism! (*cheers*) Tribalism ... Bribery and corruption! ... Neo-colonialism (16)

Garba says things the people would like to hear. We know he is mouthing empty slogans, uttering loud-sounding nonsense, all sound without sense, mere manner without matter. From what we know of the man he cannot practice what blithely drops from his lips.

If one moves from the literal to the symbolic Garba, one can then appreciate the contemporary political leadership of this country, where between theory and practice there lies a big gulf. Indeed in Cameroon between the conception of great and lofty political ideas and their first implementation, the interim is often marked by hesitation, confusion and abandonment.

Besides, Garba is a neo-colonial stooge, very much beholden to his neo-colonial master, Louis, as we gather from the following exchange between Weka and Emeka:

Weka: Oh, you don't know Louis? That's my foster father-in-law. You mean you don't know that Garba also grew up in the orphanage?

Emeka: Oh yes. Yes he does. And the rector of the orphanage was called Louis. I remember it now.

Weka: And Louis taught Garba to feel like a member of his own family. To this day, even as an old polygamist and father of a brood of brats, Garba does nothing without asking Louis first. Would you believe, for instance, that Garba lets Louis keep his money for him and cannot buy anything without Louis' blessing?

Emeka: Joking! You mean even the money from your farms? (37-38).

The tone of the play is generally grave, and Emeka, with his unique brand of language, in some ways, represents the dimension of comic relief. As a young, childhood friend of Weka, he pressed his claims to marry her with feeling and emotion. But many years later, when Weka's marriage to Garba is on the rocks, Emeka is still willing to marry her if only she herself is so inclined. However, Emeka is now mature enough to address the issue without passion. And when Weka does not warm up to the idea, he seems to understand her. Things and people have changed, and so has Emeka. That is life, that is realism.

But what does not seem to be very realistic about Emeka is his odd brand of English when one considers that he was also brought up in the orphanage along side Weka. Both were tutored by Sister Sabeth and Rev Gordon whose English is the standard type. How come one pupil is a linguistic model and the other the foil? How is it that Weka speaks smooth English, and Emeka the broken version?

If we can believe Emeka himself he got into the orphanage older and left it earlier than Weka:

Gordon: I do in no wise stand by that claim.

Emeka: Hear how you de talk now, Reverend Gordon. This girl grewed in the orphanage under your care.

Gordon: Yes.

Emeka: And I grewed in the same orphanage under your care, though I older than she and I vacated from the orphanage before she do.
(18-19)

From the sense and poor quality of the language of this last statement Emeka must have entered the orphanage some where beyond 13 years old, the age above which linguists believe it is difficult to acquire a language with natural ease. According to these experts rapid language acquisition occurs before that point. And since Emeka apparently did not stay long in the orphanage, his speech habits were not well-formed, and his language skills not properly polished. This would then be the only justification for the language he speaks, a mixture of pidgin and broken English, an idiom full of tautology and malapropism, reminding one of

Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop on the one hand, and Chief Zebrudaya of a Nigerian popular comedy, on the other. With this brand of language, Emeka incarnates fun and humour, at times a lot of fun and humour.

Gordon: All that is true, gentleman, but I don't see how it makes Weka your wife. I know you got along very well while in the orphanage, but that was as childhood friends.

Emeka: What are you mean by childhood friends? In the African customary, woman are friend to woman and man are friend to man. Man are not friend to woman. If man get along to woman, as you call it, and she are not his sister, she are his wife or intendant.

Gordon: Whatever be the provisions of your strange ... 'Customary', you and Weka were both children being brought up together in the orphanage.

Emeka: (*Long derisive laugh*) Reverend Gordon, so you have resident in Africa for so many ages of years and yet you does not know that African marriages start in the childhood? Is it because of dowry or ... as you calls it, brideprice? When I was still a childhood my papa for givam-even if it was quantum of cows and goats. But even as he was not alive, Chineka keep his dear soul, I for do it myself when I growed up small. Only she too have no father, and I cannot give the dowry ... pride price to you since you ...

Gordon: This is the 20th century, Emeka, and childhood marriages arranged by parents are not part of civilized living. I brought you up and I am ashamed you don't recognize that.

Emeka: I coconise well well that you are not like this kind marriage in your country fashion. Thas why I am not pay pride ... dowry for

you. But Weka is African woman and I am African man. And marriage of Africans must follow according by African customary country fashion, not English civilization. And you say that you bring us up. Yes. And that's why she has better chance to understanding me than any other man. We have grown up with the same thinking and the same fashion. Look at her self. She loves me and I love her.

Unor: I'm afraid, Mr. Emeka you should have sorted out your claims before now. It's rather late. But, as you know, the courts are still open, even after we conduct this marriage. And let me remind you that Weka chose Garba of her own free will.

Emeka: Which free wheel? Has she become an engineer?

Gordon: I'm sorry, Mr. Emeka, we'll have to proceed. Make an effort to be a cheerful loser.

Emeka: God punish you for cheerful loser. You think I have traversed the Cross River to proceed here because I have no chairs in my house? Look, my friend, if you do not take your kias, I am not minded to interfere this bloody cerebrum now. (*Pause*) (19-20)

Ngome's other characters speak standard, idiomatic English, and here we are exposed to beautiful language. It consists of natural, spontaneous and appropriately colloquial exchanges that are a joy to listen to time and again, the kind of language one would like to expose one's children learning English to. His dialogues thus have a high conversational value, the work of a stylist and a brilliant conversationalist versed in the art of talking, a dramatic attribute of great value. For it has the advantage of holding and sustaining the interest of both readers and audiences. The whole play bristles with wit.

But we will cite here just a section from the opening of the play. We should note the caring and motherly attitude of Sister Sabeth towards Weka. The former has come to divulge information of utmost importance to the latter, totally taken unawares. Also worth noting is Sister Sabeth's gradual and natural preparation of Weka for the great news and the latter's surprise, and natural response, as well as Sabeth's quick and equally realistic reaction to allay Weka's fears:

Sabeth: Weka! ... Weka! (*Weka opens her eyes*) Wake up, my child.

Weka: Huuh? (*Rubs her eyes violently, then tries to adjust them to the lights*) Blessed Virgin, I can't believe it's already morning.

Sabeth: Seven o'clock, my dear. You missed morning devotion already, and you are just about to miss the most golden sunrise of all time.

Weka: (*Tossing off the blanket*) I'm sorry, Sister Sabeth. I could hardly sleep all night. Just kept tossing and turning until the small hours of this morning.

Sabeth: Anything the matter?

Weka: I don't know, Sister Sabeth. I just felt so low all night. As if something really depressing had just happened or was about to happen to me.

Sabeth: You remembered to pray at least, I trust?

Weka: Of course. Many times. But it did not help. In fact I I I don't know.

Sabeth: Oh, you'll be alright, my dear. Things like that happen to everybody. (*pause*) I came to wake you because Reverend Gordon would like to see you. First thing this morning, he said.

Weka: Rev Gordon? Oh my God, what does the Rector want to see me so early for? What could it be?

- Sabeth: Well, I don't know if it's right for me to tell you. Maybe he should break the news himself.
- Weka: The news? What news? Sister Sabeth, please!
- Sabeth: Well, I suppose you will be sensible enough not to tell the Rector I told you.
- Weka: I will not tell him, Sister Sabeth. I swear ...
- Sabeth: Tut tut tut! No swearing, my dear child, just let your yes be yes and ...
- Weka: I am sorry, Sister. I did not mean to.
- Sabeth: The thing is, two men have been here to see the Rector about you.
- Weka: Two men! About me! What have I done to anybody?
- Sabeth: You did nothing wrong, my dear.
- Weka: Then who are these men and what could they want with me? I don't even know any ...
- Sabeth: But they seem to know you very well. One of them says he is your cousin.
- Weka: My cousin? But, Sister Sabeth, you know very well I have no relative. Otherwise my father would not have left me in the orphanage before he died.
- Sabeth: I know. But this fellow comes from Njanga clan as well ...
- Weka: I am Njanga, yes, but that does not make him my ...
- Sabeth: Well, I thought in Africa everybody is everybody's cousin, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, father, mother ...
- Weka: (*A little sour*) I know, Sister Sabeth. But what will this particular cousin want with me now, is my problem.
- Sabeth: It happens that my little Weka is a well-brought-up girl with a rather ungodly allowance of good looks, and Garba happens to be particularly sensitive to fresh beauty. (1-3)

Ngome's dialogues are also composed of sharp, pointed exchanges, with characters engaged in quick repartee. The exchanges between Emeka and the judge, already quoted above, are an example, the quality of Emeka's language notwithstanding. Other examples include the give-and-take between Weka, on the one hand, and Sister Sabeth and Rev Gordon, on the other, as they try to persuade her to marry against her will (5-7).

We have only hinted at the beauty and ingenuity of the structure of this play whose highlights are as follows: Act I deals mostly with Weka in the orphanage, and Act 2 scene 4, with her marriage to Garba. The story then rises to a climax at the end of Act 3 Scene 4, at the Capitol Theatre, with the embarrassing encounter between the capricious couples. The ensuing fracas is an effective theatrical device full of the potential and stuff out of which comedy is made. It reminds us of a similar, though an indoor, scene in Albert Waingeh's *Who Well* where two unfaithful couples are similarly exposed much to their embarrassment and chagrin.

After this dramatic high point there is a noticeable denouement, beginning with Act 4 Scene 1 wherein we find Weka back in her father's house, and gradually ending in Act 5 scene 3 with the court's ruling on the marriage, a verdict that Weka will certainly exploit to her advantage. For the first clause of the court's judgement runs thus:

One, that the marriage remains subject to confirmation between husband and wife on a one-to-one basis, and to the total exclusion of all other parties. It shall become void once any of the two parties concerned objects thereto (58).

What God Has Put Asunder is written essentially in a satirical mode, making Ngome's style a combination of subtle criticism, wit and humour. Thus we find him subtly exposing the hypocrisy of some individuals and institutions. It is in this context that we place Garba's high-sounding but hollow declarations, utterances condemning spend-thrift husbands who waste their wives' hard-earned cash on paramours in luxury hotels. The truth is that Garba can be quartered with his own petard, for he is a clear exemplum of what he is condemning. Similarly, the Garba who intends to stand

as a bulwark against neo-colonialism is its ardent agent! For is this not the man incapable of taking important economic or political decisions without the prior consultation of his former colonial master, now keeper of his coffers?

There is also the attack on some authorities of the Catholic Church like Rev Gordon and Sister Sabeth who have violated the vow of chastity. In another way the hypocrisy of these ecclesiastics is revealed through their stereotypical European preconceptions very prejudicial to Africans. They uphold double standards. They tell Weka that in Europe no girl is forced to marry a man against her will, but insist on Weka marrying Garba against her best judgement. For them there certainly is no contradiction in their philosophy; surely what prevails in civilized Europe cannot be enforced in 'primitive' Africa.

As far as the bulk of Epie Ngome's criticism goes, it is to be found largely at the symbolic, political level, where we are concerned with the political union between the people of the former Southern Cameroons, on the one hand, and those of La République du Cameroun, on the other; that is, the Anglophone and Francophone equation in today's Cameroon. In this regard, the whole play is a veiled criticism of the attitude of the Francophone leadership vis-à-vis the Anglophone minority. It is at this level that the play derives much of its social significance.

It is a clear proof of the fact that politics affects all aspects of our lives as we struggle in our daily efforts to make sense of nature, to produce from our environment the means of livelihood: food, shelter, and clothing. As we said earlier he who controls political power makes crucial economic decisions. That is, those in the ruling class have greater control over the productive forces, and are therefore, more influential than those excluded from it. They have a greater say in the production and distribution of scarce resources and can decide who gets what, how much and when. It is in this sense that the dominant ideas in any society are the ideas of those in control of political power.

And it is within this perspective that we place the social relevance of Victor Epie Ngome's play in so far as it dramatizes the political relationship between the minority Anglophones and the majority Francophones in present day Cameroon. This bond is generally viewed by Anglophones as grossly skewed in favour of the

Francophones in whose hands lies political leadership, with the political, economic and cultural advantages accruing from it. With these facts there is an inevitable Anglophone reaction, especially when one recalls that they entered into the political union with Francophones as political equals.

Therefore, when in the court Weka makes a statement relating to the illegality of the marriage between her and Garba, that declaration is not to be taken lightly. When she says 'ours was a relationship too fraught with deceit and irregularities to be considered marriage', she is making an important pronouncement, a grave accusation against her husband Garba. Now beyond the domestic level this indictment represents, on the political plain, the myriad of collective grievances held by Anglophones against their Francophone brothers, complaints that were the justification for the famous Buea Declaration, grievances that together with the declaration constitute, as stated earlier, what has come to be known in Cameroon today as the 'Anglophone Problem.'

The Anglophones see the imposition of the 1972 unitary state as the destruction of whatever basis there was for them to enjoy some political, economic and cultural rights. Prior to that date, within the federal system, Anglophones still exercised a modicum of political and economic control over life in their territory. They still had their legislature, government, House of Chiefs, the judiciary and the police under their control; they could still boast of institutions like the West Cameroon Development Agency, the West Cameroon Electricity Co-operation (Powercam) and the Cameroon Bank: they still had the West Cameroon Marketing Board with huge financial reserves to the tune of CFA 78 billion francs; they still could pride themselves of agro-industrial establishments like the Santa Coffee Estate; and Anglophone towns like Mamfe, Kumba, Tiko, Nkambe, Wum and Victoria were still booming².

But with the imposition of the unitary state and the consequent eroding of Anglophone influence in favour of the Francophones, things went from bad to worse. From the look of things, and from the Anglophone perspective, it was only a matter of time and they would all be speaking French; and with John Bullism strangulated they would all be assimilated. And yet between the two brothers there are some significant, irreconcilable differences in philosophy and outlook. According to Francis Wache,

The only thing that Anglophones and Francophones seem to share in common in Cameroon is geographical propinquity. Although they are physically contiguous, they, psychologically, live in separate worlds, which, by any standards, is no measure for national cohesion (Wache 2002:4).

Hence the title of Ngome's play – *What God Has Put Asunder*, and one is tempted to complete it with Biblical finality, let no man put together. In essence Epie Ngome is saying there should be no artificial union where there is a natural, unbridgeable division.

To protect their cultural heritage and their rights, Anglophones convened the historic All Anglophone Conference in Buea, a godsend opportunity within the framework of the impending Great or Enlarged National Debate announced by the Biya Government. The Anglophones therefore converged in Buea to take a united stand to present their problem to the government and to ensure that their rights as a linguistic and cultural minority be protected and enshrined in a well-written constitution of the country. Their collective stand was in favour of a federal structure of government wherein they would enjoy the political, economic and cultural rights that had been theirs prior to 1972. We quote here their concluding key declaration:

We solemnly make this declaration:

- 1) That the imposition of the unitary state on Anglophone Cameroon in 1972 was unconstitutional, illegal and a breach of faith.
- 2) That the only redress adequate to right the wrongs done to Anglophone Cameroon and its people since the imposition of the unitary state is a return to the original form of government of the reunified Cameroon.
- 3) That to this end, all Cameroonians of Anglophone heritage are committed to working for the restoration of a federal constitution and a federal form of government which takes cognizance of the bicultural nature of Cameroon and under which citizens shall be protected against such violations as have here above been enumerated.

- 4) That the survival of Cameroon in peace and harmony depends upon the attainment of this objective towards which all patriotic Cameroonians, Francophones as well as Anglophones, should relentlessly work.

We, the people of Anglophone Cameroon, convinced of the justice of our cause and relying firmly on the protection of the Almighty God, do hereby, in support of this declaration and in pursuit of the objectives therein set out, mutually pledge to each other, our lives, well-being, property, careers and freedom³.

While the Anglophone Problem is a daily fact in the consciousness of Anglophone Cameroonians, their majority Francophone counterparts understandably play it down. However, the official government media has since moved from total silence on the issue to a grudging acknowledgement of its existence in the sense that the government-owned Cameroon Radio and Television, the CRTV, can now refer to it in French as 'La Question Anglophone'⁴.

True, the Anglophone Problem is yet to be solved. But publicly talking about it and acknowledging its existence is already a step in the right direction. In this light, therefore, the ultimate social significance of *What God Has Put Asunder* to the Anglophone Cameroonian community lies in the fact that it has contributed, to an extent, to the overall education of the Anglophones. Of course it may be too much of a claim to say that the present state of the critical consciousness of Anglophones is the sole work of this single play. The play is only part, albeit an important part, of a larger social process that came in with some measure of press freedom. The robust Anglophone private press and the enlightened Anglophone political opinion together with some of the other works examined in this study, are partners in the whole process of the education of the Anglophone masses, in the pedagogy of the deprived.

Thus, at the literal level, *What God Has Put Asunder* pleases while it teaches; but at the allegorical level it pleases and teaches even more. To some extent it has helped bickering Anglophones to move

from battle ground to higher ground in search of common ground.⁵ It has been part of a process that produced the historic All Anglophone Conferences, AACI and AAC II, resulting respectively in the famous Buea Declaration and Bamenda Proclamation.

Notes

1. Victor Epie Ngome, *What God Has Put Asunder*. Yaoundé: Pitcher Books Ltd. 1992. Page reference to this play are taken from this edition.
2. See *The Buea Declaration*.
3. *The Buea Declaration*, 29-30.
4. On Sunday night of January 27, 2002, the government – controlled Cameroon Radio and Television (the CRTV) in a TV programme anchored by Nyoh Moses (Anglophone) and Mbella Essengue (Francophone), held a round-table discussion on 'National Unity 2002', during which an aspect of the Anglophone Problem was timidly touched upon. The all pro-government panellists consisted of such eminent personalities as Retired Chief Justice Endeley and Francis Nkwain (Anglophones) and Moussa Yaya, Biyo Olinga, and Amye Gérard (Francophones). Though there were no strong defenders of the Anglophone cause on the panel, the conservative debate was a sign that the government was gradually trying to come to grips with the Anglophone issue.
5. The Rev Jesse Jackson, when he visited Cameroon in 1993, tried to persuade Cameroonians on the opposite political divide to sink their differences and build a greater nation. He used an expression to the effect that they should 'move from battle ground to higher ground in search of common ground' or something of that nature. We find the expression very apt to describe the spirit that brought quarrelling Anglophones together.

Chapter Three

Bole Butake – Empowerment of Women and the Masses

Although from their impressive output female African writers have made great strides in fictional writing, making it henceforth impossible for readers and critics to ignore them, African literature, as it now stands, is still largely the business of male African writers whose works reflect male-dominated societies. With the notable exceptions of such works as Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* (1962); Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1982); Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966); Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987); and Fale Wache's *Lament of a Mother* (1990), in which women play prominent roles, African male writers seldom present women in roles other than those limited to motherhood, marriage and related domestic concerns, while scenes for great social events are the exclusive domains of the male characters. It is in this context that we must situate the unique theatrical contribution of a Cameroonian male playwright, Bole Butake.

The publication of Bole Butake's *Lake God and Other Plays* (1999), by Editions CLE Yaoundé, confirms him as one of the two giants of the Anglophone Cameroon literary theatre today. Whether drawing from a mythic imagination or from the contemporary social scene, Butake succeeds in making his plays scathing commentaries on contemporary social life both in Cameroon, in particular, and Africa in general; especially where there is irresponsible political leadership, unconscionable dictatorial rule, rapacious greed, corruption, immorality and the misuse of power. This malpractice by the elite in control of the reins of power provokes the justified anger of the oppressed masses who advocate a change of the status quo, a protest in which women play a primordial role. For in most of Butake's dramas women have moved from their traditional back-seat role of passive players to the foreground as a powerful force to be reckoned with if any significant social change is to take place.

The six plays in the collection handle various themes and social issues: the eternal conflict between traditionalism and modernity (*Lake God*); dictatorial rule in a local chieftdom, the use or misuse of power, as well as the powerful role of women in combating the forces of evil (*And Palm Wine Will Flow*); insatiable greed and the human exploitation of a human situation (*The Survivors*); the negative effects, on the civilian population, of military dictatorship (*Shoes and Four Men in Arms*); a classic illustration of the maxim that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely (*Dance of the Vampires*); and corruption and the travesty of justice (*The Rape of Michelle*).

Early in the play entitled *Lake God*¹ two lines of action developing into major conflicts can be discerned already. One concerns the perennial clash between traditionalism and modernity. There is, on the one hand, a modern, western-educated chieftain, (Fon²), who, having espoused Christianity, makes a clean break with the heathen past of his people, annulling traditional practices and annual rituals to the Lake God. On the other hand, there are Shey Bo-Nyo, the Chief Priest of the Lake God, and the *Knifon* and the *Fibuen*³, respectively male and female secret cults that defend the age-old traditions of the land. To ensure the fertility of the land they uphold the yearly sacrifice to the Lake God.

The other line of action deals with local women whose crops have been destroyed by the cows of the Fon's protégé, Dewa. The women arrest, bind and carry Dewa to the Fon for severe sanctions to be meted out to him. However, the Fon expels neither the cattle owners nor the cattle themselves; so the women's problem remains unsolved. Far from giving up, however, the enraged but determined women are ready to fight for their cause. To battle with the Fon they resort to an imaginative strategy. Like the Athenian women of Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata*, they take a secret oath of sealed lips to go on a sexual strike and also to starve their husbands until the latter bring pressure to bear on the willful Fon. In effect the women resolve to punish their menfolk in two ways: sex and food.

By so doing they could not have devised a more powerful weapon with which to combat the men. The effect of their unprecedented action is felt palpably and almost immediately by their husbands as revealed by the frustrations of the following men:

Fisiy: That is a heavy story. It shows that the women are determined.

Forgwei: What is to be done?

Lagham: Good question. What can we do to expel the cattle people and their cattle; especially as our Fon and our own people are also cattle owners? It is clear that until the cattle leave the land, no adult male is going to eat properly or sleep with a woman.

Forgwei: Who gave such powers to the women? (30)

That is the question. But the truth is that nobody has given the women such powers as they now wield over their men. Necessity is the mother of invention; difficult circumstances have forced the women to be ingeniously creative. And so they have come up with an original plan to deal with their recalcitrant Fon through their husbands. The men now realize what tremendous powers the women have over them. Until the cattle go away, as Lagham says, no adult male is going to eat well or sleep with his own wife, for that matter.

The men then concert on the appropriate course of action. Going to the Fon may not solve their problem, for he may simply refuse to receive them. They then resolve to pass through Shey Tanto, the most influential member of the *Kwifon*, the male secret cult with authority over the Fon.

Meanwhile, Father Leo, the Catholic priest with great Christian influence over the Fon, sermonizes the errant women in Church for still practising heathen ways and misleading the rest of the women. Haranguing the women Father Leo cries out:

Yensi, Kimaa and the other devils; yes, they must be called by the name they deserve. Yensi, Kimaa and the other devils are taking you on a fast and easy ride on the big motor road to Lucifer's Kingdom. (*Pointing out women in the audience*) You were in the *Fibuen*, not so? And you too. And even you, sister Maria. You are not ashamed that you went to soil the Virgin mother's name in Satan's play? You all were in the *Fibuen*, participating in Satan's play and eating of his good and taking oaths. All for what my children? Mere corn? Common corn?

Have you forgotten so soon what the lord Jesus said?
Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about life, what you
will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.
Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap
or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father
feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?
(32)

However, for all the force of Father Leo's diatribe, none of the women budges from the stand already taken, an indication of the power of traditional values over Western Christian ones. And so the stalemate remains, with the Fon refusing to chase out the cattlemen, and the women remaining adamant in their strike. An African proverb says that when two elephants fight, the grass suffers. The menfolk of this society have thus become the unwilling grass caught in the crossfire between two mighty opposites.

The deadlock persists until the lake God bursts out in anger through the deadly explosion of the lake which decimates all animate life, leaving only four human survivors. The explosion of the lake crashes in, more or less, like a *deus ex machine*, putting an end to a conflict whose resolution, from indicators in the play, would most probably have favoured the powerful women.

At a crucial point in the play entitled *The Survivors*, power is in the hands of the central character, Mboysi, a woman, who has the other main character, a male military officer crawling for mercy before her as she holds a revolver menacingly over his head. The intriguing thing is that the gun is the officer's, but using her feminine wiles, Mboysi succeeds in making him willingly hand it over to her. Just a while before, when the weapon was in the officer's keeping, he was all-powerful.

But the more potent stratagem used by Mboysi to subdue the military officer has been her feminine charms which the lustful soldier could hardly resist. Survivors of a natural catastrophe, Mboysi and four other companions are heading for the adjacent village to seek shelter and protection. Then a military officer in charge of a refugee camp stops them and seizes the young, beautiful woman to become his good-time mistress, and then quarantines her companions in a make-shift hut far away from him.

These five are all the refugees there are in the camp, but the impression is given to the outside world that there are thousands of them. So relief supplies keep coming in which Officer collects and piles up in many tents for his own selfish end and that of his superiors. He would not listen to the survivors' plea to allow them to leave the camp, for that would mean the end of his exploitation of the human situation in two senses: in his materialistic accumulation of wealth on the one hand, and animalistic gratification of his lust, on the other. As soon as Mboysi becomes aware of this exploitative intent, she uses her feminine ruses to overcome Officer in a bid to gain their freedom.

But despite the fact that the woman bungles the only chance to eliminate Officer who turns around and kills her instead, the thesis of the play seems clear enough: that weak as society has come to take them to be, women do possess within them the wiles and potential to subdue power-hungry men and dictators to bring salvation to their societies.

In *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, women play a decisive role in the resolution of the conflict pitting two ideologically-opposed camps: the forces of evil versus those of good. The forces of evil are led by the Fon, the symbol of a life style of hedonism. The chieftain surrounds himself with stooges and flatters to whom he dispenses favours arbitrarily. Merry-making and drunkenness are highly valued.

On the other hand, the forces of good, led by Shey Ngong, the Chief Priest of Nyombom, the crucible of spiritual values, are critical of the Fon's carefree life style. As a result, the Fon plans to destroy the sacred grove where Shey Ngong worships Nyombom. But the spiritual forces of the land refuse to sit by idly and allow the land to be desecrated.

Kwengong, the wife of Shey Ngong, but now transformed into a spirit, the Earth-goddess, prophesies doom, and Kibaranko, the destructive spiritual force, destroys the Fon's palace. The women throw their weight behind the forces of good. The elderly women of the land assemble, stark naked, and extract a potion from their private parts and put it in a pot, a concoction the Fon is compelled to drink and die and give way to good governance and responsible leadership in the land.

According to the powerful, old women henceforth the land will no longer be ruled by any dictatorial Fon, but by a council of elders under the guidance of Shey Ngong, the spiritual leader. But the people reserve the right to sanction even Shey Ngong as soon as he evinces high-handedness. In the words of Kwengong, Shey Ngong's wife:

The only men left in the land are the women. And they do not want any more Fons (112) ... He cannot be Fon. The women have decided. No more Fons in the land! ... The people will rule through the council of elders led by Shey, here. The Day that he takes the wrong decision, that same day, the people shall meet in the market place and put another at the head of the council of elders (113).

Towards the end of the play, Shey Ngong declares: 'From today this bugle will stay here in the sacred grove, a living symbol of our enslavement by the Fon and his notables. Take the sacred gong to the people and let its sound vibrate through their very souls, a symbol of their liberation' (113)

The liberation of the people from the tyranny of the pleasure-loving Fon, has thus been achieved thanks largely to the forceful intervention by this unique group of elderly women⁴ whose nudity is their sole protection because no adult male can stand the sight of the exposure of their nakedness without the risk of the loss of his manhood. Therefore to avoid any such malediction, on the approach of the old, naked women, men either turn their backs on them, or turn their gaze elsewhere, or take to their heels.

In *Shoes and Four men in Arms* Butake examines the negative effects, on the citizens of an unnamed African country, of economic, political and administrative malpractice by a military dictatorship. There is misery, joblessness and penury in the land. The social malaise provokes a popular uprising. Under the leadership of pro-democracy activists the disenchanted population comes out chanting:

'We want freedom! We want jobs! We want salaries! Give us freedom! Liberty now! Freedom! Liberty! Freedom!'. (141)

An elite squad from the military junta unleashes terror on the people, brutalizing the men and raping some young women. It is at this point that the task-force of the naked but formidable, elderly women known in this play as *Kil'u*⁵ comes in on the side of pro-democracy activists. With their deadly nakedness the *Kil'u* send marauding soldiers scampering for safety, as revealed in the following conversation among three soldiers known simply as Second, Third and Fourth:

Third: The *Kil'u* women. Very old and very dangerous women.

Second: They carry arms?

Fourth: Yes, bamboos. Long bamboos.

Second: What do they do with bamboos?

Third: Nothing. They just walk with bamboos. Like walking sticks, you know.

Second: Why were the soldiers running?

Third: Captain, you know what it means for an old woman to expose her nakedness before your yes.

Fourth: A curse beyond measure.

Third: The end of your manhood. What is the use being a soldier without your manhood?

Second: Where have they been? I never heard about them before.

Third: They have always been around. Kind of the mountain of Elephants. Sleeping volcano if you see what I mean.

Fourth: But why the volcanic eruption only now?

Third: You should know, sergeant. Since the day you people whipped leaders of Mfu and Manjong⁶ and *Kwifon* did not react, the *Kil'u* erupted. The pronouncements of *Kil'u* are law in the land. If the *Kil'u* says today is market or nobody's nose should smell the outside air, that is law (138-139).

Therefore, the *Kil'u* has become a powerful force to be reckoned with in this society: for it is feared and respected by not only the ordinary citizens but by even the military men themselves. The progressive forces of the society can count on the crucial support of these women for future action.

Ultimately Butake's unique contribution to African theatre must be placed at the didactic level of educating and enlightening the African woman about her own enormous socio-political potential. He has placed her on the theatrical pedestal and given her new roles in a society wont to taking her for granted or relegating her to the background with regard to the handling of social issues. From the four plays examined, Butake has shown how daring and creative women can be; how, when pushed to the wall, they can fight back their perceived enemy with imagination and tenacity; and how they can draw on their natural charms for their own social advantage. In short, the playwright has demonstrated that women have socio-political power that, if properly managed, can influence, or even alter completely the course of political events to their own advantage.

The play *Dance of the Vampires* is a supreme illustration of the maxim that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Psaul Roi the central character and despot would go to any length to rule and reign supreme, even if it means emptying his kingdom of its human souls to do so. And, indeed, he does give away the land and its people to the devil in exchange for absolute power.

However, there exists a cult of vampires to which he is a co-opted but not an initiated member. With all his powerful royal acts, Psaul Roi cannot destitute his own powerful Town Crier, Chambiay, because the latter is the Chief Vampire. The monarch therefore seeks complete membership within the cult. The central cult members refuse to initiate him for two reasons: firstly a vampire monarch would automatically become the chief vampire, a factor that would neutralize the power of the other vampires; secondly the price to pay for a vampire monarch would be too high for the kingdom. It would entail such disasters as earthquake, fires and human blood.

But Psaul Roi waves aside all this and corrupts his way to initiation by showering money on one of the cult members, Song, and promising him a share of power in the Kingdom. Having been disguised and smuggled into the vampire temple, Psaul Roi is inevitably initiated, following the governing rules of the cult. In the wake of his induction, however, calamities begin to visit the sins of the despot on his people. There is an earthquake in a mountainous region of the country in which 2000 people have

perished; then a big market in another part of the country goes up in flames. The dictator orders that the salvaged goods from the market be taken to his place.

When some of the citizens in the large crowd he is addressing wonder how he can be so unfeeling and inhuman, Psaul Roi orders his soldiers to open fire on them. They obey and the streets are littered with thousands of bodies. Many survivors flee the country, leaving virtually an empty kingdom behind. Salvation comes through a patriotic and an enlightened army General, Nformi. Aware of the pernicious, neo-colonial grip of Albania on the rich forests of the country, he arrests and expels the Albanian emissary who has come to rebuild the destroyed country. The General also arrests and puts in a cage with a bunch of ripe bananas suspended above them, Psaul Roi and Song, to be taken to the market place for public display.

In a continent notorious for its dictators hungry for eternal political power, Butake's play has so much social significance. It dramatizes the secret fantasies of self-centred, power-hungry rulers who, like Marlowe's Faustus, would stop at nothing to sell their souls to the devil, to attain first the political kingdom so that all other earthly things will be theirs.

From the point of view of technique Butake's craftsmanship manifests itself in his adroit manipulation of dramatic elements like passion and poetry, sound and sense, suspense and spectacle, tension and tone, creative lighting and imaginative décor. Some of the dramas like *Lake God* and *And Palm Wine Will Flow* are rich in African theatrical idioms injecting freshness into them and expanding their range of interpretation. The playwright skilfully incorporates into them such African theatrical elements as dance, song, ritual, mime, mask, spirit possession, invocation, incantation, and ululation, etc.

Through Kwengong and the Tapper, Butake successfully uses the device of spirit possession with dramatic effect. In *And Palm Wine Will Flow* Kwengong and the Tapper function at both the human and spiritual levels. They are just like other human beings in the play, but when possessed by a spirit, woman and man become spirits, respectively the Earth-goddess and Kibaranko, the masked spirit that destroys the agents of the forces of evil capable of creating momentous actions and events.

With the aid of high technology theatrical effects like winds and storms can be effectively realized at the beginning of *Lake God*. Also effectively used is the flashback technique in *And Palm Wine Will Flow* where Kwengong is shown carrying the horrible potion the Fon is forced to drink. Butake endows his characters with language that is clean, clear and crisp, a factor that certainly endears him to the audience.

In terms of dramatic technique Bole Butake's *And Palm Wine Will Flow* and Epie Ngome's *What God Has Put Asunder* have this essential similarity: They are dramas at both the literal and symbolic levels. At the allegorical level, within the Cameroonian context, both plays carry significant contemporary political relevance. Butake's purported examination of the cause of failure of local authority and his study of the democratic process is valid in its own right at the surface level.

But when examined against the background of the political effervescence of the 1990s in Cameroon, the play would be seen to be a metaphor for what was happening at the national level. In other words his local politics is in a real sense national politics. In the words of H.N. Eyoh, the play's 'localized setting becomes a microcosm of the world,'⁷ and one could in this regard say that the Fon's extravagant life style and his heavy-handed political decisions, together with the fawners and schemers surrounding him, are of particular relevance. These and more are the issues that have provoked the type of opposition put up against him, championed by Shey Ngong. This reflects, at the national level, the type of opposition put up against the present regime by radical political parties. Still in connection with technique, one can say that there is an abundant use of proverbs in *And Palm Wine Will Flow*. A proverb is generally defined as a brief epigrammatic saying that has become a popular aphorism or an axiom. However, in our opinion, not all axioms, maxims or aphorisms are pure proverbs. The test for the true proverb is its applicability; that is, a real proverb can be, and usually is, applied to situations other than the apparent context of its coinage. The authentic proverbs are more figurative than factual, more metaphorical or personificative than matter-of-fact.

Depending on the degree of its distinctiveness or environmental coloration, a proverb can be said to be traditional or universal. The

more environmentally colourful it is, the more traditional; the more colourless it is, the more universal. The following are some of the proverbs in *And Palm Wine Will Flow*.

1. The cockroach does not call a fowl to a wrestling match. (11)
2. The gorilla can do nothing to an iroko tree. (90)
3. The stream never flows uphill. The Leopard and the Goat have never been bedfellows. (90)
4. The Louse and the jigger have no need for brains. (93)
5. The Leopard does not wrestle with a goat. (93)
6. It is a foolish rat that argues with a cat. (88)
7. The lion announces its presence with roaring. (104)
8. The Leopard prowls among the goats, and they scatter into the dark night! (104)
9. The lion spreads terror among the cattle and the sheep! (104)
10. When the elephant flaps his ears and sounds his trumpet, the forest is in disarray for he has gone berserk. (104)
11. The eagle flies and flies but always returns home! (107)
12. The prowling lion comes back to its den for rest! (107)
13. After devastating the forest the elephant goes down to the river for a drink! (107)
14. The farmer spent all day in the fields but returned home at dusk and went to sleep! (107)

Most of the proverbs are full of animal metaphors with all that is implied in the animal's brute force, intelligence, smartness, or parasitism. In proverb 1 the voice warns Shey Ngong of his foolhardiness in attempting to argue with the great ruler of Ewawa. But in proverb 2, it is Shey Ngong who asserts his superiority vis-à-vis the Fon, and in proverb 3, the Chief Priest affirms the impossibility of his ever bowing down to the traditional ruler. Shey Ngong is a spiritual leader, the Chief Priest of Nyombom. He is therefore spiritually and morally superior to the corrupt Fon of

Ewawa, and can justifiably claim to be the leopard and the cat. In contrast, the parasitic stooges and bootlickers surrounding the Fon are no more than jiggers and lice with not much need for brains.

In a general way, proverbs 1 to 6 underscore the basic conflict between the Chief Priest and the Fon. They point to the moral superiority of the former over the latter. They are, therefore, thematically functional. On the one hand, the string of proverbs from 7 to 10 comprises multiple metaphors chanted by Shey Ngong as a prelude to Kibaranko's outing and activities, giving the audience a hint of the violent nature of such activities. On the other hand, the other proverbs, 11-14, also comprising multiple metaphors, are equally chanted by Shey Ngong. This time they are intoned in preparation for the return of Kibaranko after his hectic activities. They point to peace after violence, calm after turbulence, rest after a hard day's work.

The proverbs are uttered by elderly, responsible people. Shey Ngong is a man of high spiritual status in the society. It is fitting that he should speak in proverbs which, with the metaphors they embody, help to underscore the second and more important level of meaning of this play, highlighting its allegorical nature; for, in the Cameroonian context, the play is a political allegory, a literary form in which objects, persons, and actions have meanings that lie outside the story itself. That is, the play dramatizes a political reality in the guise of another. And as such its 'deep structure' meaning resides in these metaphors, hence their effective use.

The world depicted in *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, like that in *Lake God*, is a world essentially traditional, one wherein the old spiritual order is still very much in place; for the ancestors, the living and the unborn are still part of the cyclic trinity, with the revered ancestors and deities still exerting tremendous force on the living, acting as their guardians and protectors. The living worship the living-dead and perform rituals for them; sacrifices and libations become a communication link that keeps the living, the living-dead and the unborn in a type of communion.

In *And Palm Wine Will Flow* invocations and libations are performed by Shey Ngong, the Chief Priest of Nyombom, just as in *Lake God* the rituals are carried out by Shey Tanto, leader of the Kwifon. Two of the invocations from *And Palm Wine Will Flow* run thus:

Shey Ngong: Oh! Nyombom!
Creator and guardian of the land,
And you our illustrious forebears,
Grant me strength and wisdom
To weather the surging storm.
The Fon has lost vision.
The noble men and elders of this land
Now listen only to the inner voice
Of greed, and fear of a man who
Surrounded himself with listeners
And watchdogs to do his bidding.
Nyombom and you, ancestors,
Grant me strength and wisdom
Grant me patience and love (89) ...

Shey Ngong: Oh! Nyombom!
Creator and guardian of the land!
And you illustrious ancestors!
Grant me courage;
Bestow upon us the wisdom to steer
This land back on the right path.
Give Kibaranko the strength to sack
The palace where the notables of this
land
Have turned themselves into suckers
of blood and wine.
(*Distant alarm*)
Kibaranko in action!
Let their heads be crushed like
pumpkins
And their brains be licked by the dogs!
Let their bones crack and their
members
Be torn each from the other until they lie
Scattered in the devastating fire! (105)

Of course, in these extracts are raised some of the central concerns in the play. Indeed the issues generating the dramatic tension are almost literally stated in the invocations, indicating thus the obvious dramatic function of the invocatory appeal.

Other features of orature like songs and chants, choral responses and praise names are also worked into *And Palm Wine Will Flow* (94-95), etc). With regard to praise names the ruler of Ewawa is metaphorically called the sun, the elephant, and the lion. But these adulatory names are used ironically; for in the context of the play, and in the view of those chanting the names, incarnated in the animal metaphors by which he is known, Kwengong uses the praise names to refer to the Fon of Ewawa that has fallen and the lion that is no more (108). Her secret wish seems to be that the better 'sun', the better 'elephant' or the better 'lion' is the dead one.

The overall effect of the use of these elements of oral tradition is the investing of the play with an ever present local flavour. When we combine this with the allegorical nature of the play, wherein the local setting has both a surface and deep structure meaning, wherein the drama at once treats validly local as well as modern and contemporary national politics in Cameroon in an innovative, creative manner, we have in Bole Butake a sensitive artist in whom are combined both the traditional and modern concerns; in Eyoh's words, 'a fine craftsman at once avant-garde and traditional, or traditionally avant-gardist...'

The setting of Butake's *And Palm Wine Will Flow* indicates that we are in the presence of characters in a local environment, people still very close to tradition, folk whose spiritual world is dominated by ancestors and deities. It is therefore appropriate that such people should speak in an idiom reflective of their provenance. Hence Shey Ngong and the other elderly people in the play speak in proverbs full of environmental coloration.

As we said earlier, the dramatic conflict is between the forces of evil represented by the Fon, and those of good symbolized by Shey Ngong. All the action of the play takes place in one place, in the sacred grove, with the spotlight focused on Shey Ngong. Thus we see and hear a great deal about him but only indirectly so of the Fon, his antagonist whose actions are only reported, and messages conveyed through envoys. If the Fon's words and actions were actually dramatized by him and not simply reported, the impact on the audience or readers would be felt more.

We must admit, however, that it is a good theatrical device that allows for economy of time, space and the unnecessary movement of a large cast. Besides, if we take into consideration the fact that the play is structured to end with the exploited people taking over power, that is, when the forces of good triumph over those of evil, we can further justify Butake's concentration on Shey Ngong, the pillar of morality. The dramatic focus becomes appropriate because the playwright seems to be indirectly emphasizing what should be more prevalent in our society today, but which unfortunately is not: moral rectitude.

Kibaranko and Kwengong are characters functioning at two levels: the human and the spiritual. With them Butake employs the device of the mask and spirit-possession to achieve the extension of character roles. As a human being Kibaranko is the Chief priest's tapper, but when possessed by the spirit he is ritually transformed into a god, into a destructive spiritual force against evil. On her part, at the human level, Kwengong is one of the Chief priest's wives. Similarly, when possessed by the spirit, she too is ritually transformed into the Earth-goddess whose pronouncements have an equally devastating effect on the forces of evil. The 'Chief Priest resorts to spirit possession and mediumship as detergents to cleanse Ewawa' (Alembong 1993:136) There thus exists a thin boundary between the people and their gods.

In the dramatic struggle in the play, the gods like the ancient Greek gods, side with their worshippers against their enemies. Now the effect the godly attributes of Kibaranko and Kwengong will have on us will depend, to a great extent, on whether or not we subscribe to the traditional African world-view implicit in the play, a world-view essentially ritualistic and spiritualistic. For we are in a world where the gods are influential, with instant effect on people's lives.

Godfrey Tangwa has dismissed Bole Butake's mythic imagination of the world of the play as 'false consciousness', the kind likely to stultify rather than advance scientific development, an argument similar to one made by the philosopher Plato to dismiss poets from his ideal republic because of their misleading mythic productions prejudicial to sound reasoning (Tangwa 1987:144). Well, Professor Tangwa appropriately titled his article 'A philosophical Review'. And I say 'appropriately' because we go to literature in general for

artistic truth and not conceptual truth as science or philosophy understands it; and to the theatre, in particular, with 'a willing suspension of disbelief'.

Indeed, much of the beauty, charm and fascination of literature would be diminished if imaginative works based on myth were subjected to philosophical scrutiny. For, as an English Romantic poet, John Keats, asks in 'Lamia' 'Do not all charms fly/at the mere touch of cold philosophy?' (Gittings 1966:148).

Literary criticism deals with values which science ignores; they are artistic, if subjective, rather than scientific or philosophical. This realization should have a tempering effect on the critical attitude we bring to the stage; indeed it should induce us to accept Butake's gods and their roles with the same tolerance we show to Shakespearean ghosts and witches, forces that cannot equally stand empirical verification. For all his use of ghost, witches, and other forces of superstition, Shakespeare has painted a valid and enduring picture of life and human nature in his plays. And he has done this so well that all his plays, put together, give us a more complete view of human nature than that painted by many other individual playwrights.

The gods or ghosts in Butake and Shakespeare do not constitute the central actors. If this were so, we would be in the realm of fantasy, in the domain of science fiction. But most of the actors in these plays happen to be flesh and blood people, with only a few supernatural forces brought in.

We ought to rather accept the essentially human world presented to us by the dramatists as a given: here is a world of human beings whose way of life makes them believe in certain phenomena. Now, these people are confronted with a problem and involved in a conflict, and they crisscross one another's path. Assuming that the gods or ghosts are endowed with powers, and that they can intervene in the affairs of these human beings, the relevant question one should ask is, are the actions and behaviour of the people and the spiritual forces logical? Are they behaving in a way that is consistent and true to life, in a way that we would under similar circumstances? If the general answer is yes, then we can say there is verisimilitude; then we can say the plays have achieved artistic truthfulness.

But the works betray a few artistic weaknesses too. The last scene of *The Survivors* has shown that, emboldened by the revolver in her keeping, Mboysi has successfully reduced the exploitative Officer to total submission. Threatening to kill the crawling Officer by all means, she fires two shots off stage and then does a dance to celebrate her victory over him. Naively she concludes that the man has been killed, only for the presumably dead Officer to make a ghostly re-appearance to kill Mboysi. There is no explanation from the playwright as to how Officer has escaped death. This is artistically false.

There are a few lapses in the italicization of stage directions which in some places are neither in italics nor in parenthesis to differentiate them from normal lines, thus causing inconveniences, however slight, to readers or producers. The most evident flaw and, by the way, also the most easily corrigible weakness, is more technical than artistic: the absence of a table of contents, with the result that the reader is forced to constantly leaf through the book to locate the page where each of the six plays begins.

By and large these flaws do not ruin the plays, nor do they amount to much when placed beside Butake's dramatic strengths. His ingenious deployment of dramatic technique, his searching exploration of a diversity of relevant themes, and his interesting projection of the Cameroonian woman on to an exciting theatrical foreground lend his dramaturgy high social significance making him a major Anglophone Cameroonian literary dramatist today. He and his compatriot Bate Besong are the two colossi who bestride the Anglophone Cameroon theatrical landscape.

The successful production of Butake's plays in Cameroon is a pointer to the fact that now in Cameroon, a skilful playwright or artist with a good mastery of the English language can be subtly critical of the political system without necessarily provoking a ban on his work. Butake's example is an encouraging reality that other Cameroonian creative writers are likely to emulate, but above all, the significance of Butake's dramaturgy in Cameroon lies in the fact that his plays are an important aspect of the on-going process of political sensitization of Cameroonians in the wake of the wind of change from Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and the resurgence of multiparty politics in Africa, particularly in the last decade of

the twentieth century. For with the coming of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, there was a loosening up of the dictatorial grip on power by despots of mostly one-party regimes; there was a gradual liberalization of the press and a general goodwill to democratize and open up to multi-party politics.

Yet in many cases, especially in African countries, the external democratic pressure was not enough to force political rulers to change; internal pressure was also necessary, indeed indispensable, for any significant political change to be registered. For this reason, in Cameroon, political parties were formed and some forcefully launched in the face of stiff government resistance; social pressure groups and local human rights organizations also came into being; outspoken independent individuals emerged. All of these forces had a common goal: to force the hand of a reluctant government to yield to the wind of change and to open up to a valid democratic process that would allow for the respect for human rights and social justice.

Among these pressure groups were committed writers like those whose works constitute the subject of our study. And when we talk of committed writers we mean people who write sensitively, showing great concern for the lot of suffering humanity, people who write with the intention of improving the human condition, of contributing towards the general welfare of the greatest majority.

With regard to commitment in literature, there are certain themes or burning issues which, when treated by a literary artist, cannot leave such a writer indifferent. African societies are still to rid themselves of ills like neo-colonialism, corruption, capital flight, capitalist exploitation, greed, torture of political enemies, tribalism, embezzlement of state funds, etc. Now, a playwright or a novelist who writes with full conviction on any of these themes cannot help but take sides, however indirectly. If he examines, explores and develops these issues experientially and convincingly, he would be seen, in the final analysis, to be advocating a certain line of behaviour, to be propounding a certain ideology. He may side with the regime in place or with its victims. In most cases, however, such a writer's ideology is on the side of the victims of the social or political ills. Such is the case with Bole Butake and the other writers studied in this work.

Therefore the struggle, for example, in *And Palm Wine Will Flow* is not just a struggle between two individuals in isolation; it is a conflict between two approaches to life: the repressive, exploitative, unaccountable and irresponsible life style versus a more just, moral and responsible governance; it is a confrontation between a powerful minority that owns and controls nearly everything, versus the suffering and powerless majority deprived of the comforts of life. That is why in the end the women and the people of Ewawa side with the forces of good, symbolized by Shey Ngong, against the exploitative and arrogant Fon.

Nalova Lyonga once said that as a committed writer Bole Butake 'is always a step ahead of reality'⁸. And this reality can best be seen within the context of Cameroon politics, with regard to the wind of change mentioned above. At the time Butake was writing a certain questioning awareness was in the air, and some subtle social trends were already emerging. There was a general feeling that the dominant style of governance that had kept Cameroonians subservient and docile for many years would sooner or later be intolerable, that the present was pregnant and likely to give birth to a child with a different outlook, that the past would no longer be the future.

Given the humane disposition of the playwright and the types of issues raised in his plays and the forcefulness with which he articulates them, the logic of the optimistic endings of plays like *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, *Shoes and Four Men in Arms* and *Dance of the Vampires* does not surprise us. With regard to that of *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, to some extent, it is a prophetic ending in the sense that the play foreshadowed the launching of the main opposition political party in Cameroon, the Social Democratic Front, SDF, whose motto is: Power to the People! *And Palm Wine Will Flow* was published in 1990, and had its grand premiere on March 27, that year. Two months later, on May 26, the SDF was launched in Bamenda 'against a background of massive troop deployment, general official blackmail and intimidation'. (Tangwa 1993:144)

When this play was staged in some parts of Cameroon to audiences that subscribed to the principles that political parties like the SDF believe in, it became, and still is, a popular drama. Its popularity is largely due to the fact that it heartens the disadvantaged or the deprived and gives them a sense of direction. It tells the

people, albeit artistically and thus subtly, what to do or how to go about bringing political change. The play therefore, becomes a crucial weapon in the process of the pedagogy of the oppressed, in the education of the masses for critical consciousness. It is a measure of his commitment as a playwright that Bole Butake, according to Eckhard Breitingner (2001:16),

Has pointed out repeatedly that he uses his scripted plays to target an elite audience, those who are able to alter policies in the political arena. The elite also has the managerial and administrative expertise to effect changes and administer reformed political structures.

Notes

1. The plays discussed in this chapter are from Bole Butake, *Lake God and Other Plays* (Yaounde: Editions CLE 1999) – Page references will be taken from this edition.
2. In the North West Region of Cameroon *Fon* is the title of a traditional ruler. It is roughly equivalent to the title ‘King’ in English.
3. In some ethnic groups in the North West Region of Cameroon *Kwifon* and *Fibuen* represent respectively the male and female secret societies. The *Kwifon* that works in close collaboration with the *Fon*, is the only traditional institution with authority over the *Fon*.
4. In the North West Region of Cameroon, this unique group of elderly women is known as the *Takumbengs*.
5. The *Kil’u* is a local variation for *Takumbengs* of note No4.
6. The *Mfu* and *Manjong* are men’s secret societies whose leaders here symbolize opposition political leaders advocating democratic reforms.
7. This quote is from H.N. Eyoh’s commentary on *And Palm Wine Will Flow* in an undated document advertising the staging of the play by the Yaoundé University Theatre.
8. This quote is from Nalova Lyonga’s review of *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, in an undated document advertising the staging of the play by the Yaoundé University Theatre.

Chapter Four

Bate Besong – The Conscientisation of the Public

While Bole Butake and Victor Epie Ngome can generally be classified as writers of traditional drama, Bate Besong, in this chapter, and John Nkengasong, in Chapter Five, belong to the modernist tradition; for Besong's and Nkengasong's works reveal influences from the Theatre of the Absurd. Therefore, to better appreciate what they have done it is appropriate to first attempt a definition of the peculiar dramatic convention that has inspired them. We must, however, grant that to understand the concept of Theatre of the Absurd, a brief definition of it would hardly do. To have a working knowledge of it we must situate it within the intellectual and cultural history of Western civilization, for the Theatre of the Absurd came about as a consequence of scientific and industrial achievements as well as the spiritual malaise of that civilization.

And this concerns the period known as Modernism, which is roughly from the beginning of the 20th century to the turn of the present century. But the spectacular scientific and industrial breakthroughs that became evident in the 20th century had begun earlier, around the middle of the previous 19th century. That science and industrialism had brought a great deal of benefits to Western societies, there is no denying it. But they had their negative effects too; for if these twin aspects of modernism were a boon, they were also a bane.

Until the 19th century Western traditional values and assumptions had been fairly stable, but beginning from the middle of the 19th century some of them began to break down owing to scientific discoveries and the questioning and sceptical scientific method. Charles Darwin's revolutionary theory of natural selection as expatiated in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and other biological discoveries stood opposed to the biblical creation myth; that is, they held the view that the world did not come about as a result of instant divine creation as narrated in the book of Genesis. Geological discoveries revealed that the world was a dizzy five billion years old rather than just thousands of years as previously believed.

In the area of psychology Sigmund Freud's clinical discoveries in the field of psychoanalysis made outstanding revelations showing that man was essentially an irrational being whose personality was dominated by irrational impulses held in check in the unconscious by the ego. This was a blow to man's dignity. These findings and revelations shook the foundation of previously stable Western beliefs and assumptions. Hence the spiritual malaise.

In the words of Douglas A. Hugh despite the positive achievements by science it

has inadvertently contributed to the crisis of spirit in the modern world by destroying or weakening long held beliefs and values. More than anything else science has been responsible for the «death of God» and the arrival of nihilism, that peculiar spiritual sickness of our time that sees emptiness and meaninglessness at the core of life (Hugh 1974:143).

Zarathustra, the central character in Nietzsche's fictional work *Zarathustra* (1883) had declared that «God is dead». According to the story, as summarized by Martin Esslin, Zarathustra who had come down from the mountain to preach to mankind met a holy hermit living in the forest. This holy man tried in vain to persuade Zarathustra to remain with him in the forest. And when asked how he passed his time, the hermit replied that he spent his time composing songs which he sang; and that when he made up songs he laughed, he cried and he growled, thereby praising God. Sometime later, away from the man of God, Zarathustra wondered aloud to himself: 'can it be possible! This old saint in the forest has not yet heard that God is dead!' (Esslin 1983:399)

To many people the 'death of God' means the universe is without what was considered its 'centre and its living purpose' (Esslin, *Ibid*); it means the world is deprived of a general unifying principle that has fallen apart. Without God the World is without ultimate certainties; it has become purposeless, meaningless, absurd. Eugène Ionesco, himself a dramatist of Theatre of the Absurd, defines 'Absurd' as 'that which is devoid of purpose ... cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless' (Esslin:23). Moreover,

the horror and devastation of the two world wars had undermined the sanctity and dignity of human life, and spread traumatizing fear and terror among people, shattering all illusions of certainty and reality, of a well-ordered and meaningful world. Many people are struggling and searching for ways with dignity to come to terms with such an absurd world. The Theatre of the Absurd is one of the manifestations of such a search.

The practitioners of this dramatic convention reject 'art forms based on the continuation of standards and concepts' that are no longer valid. They therefore resort to a theatrical convention essentially different from the realistic stage familiar to many of us, adopting unorthodox dramatic techniques that often baffle audiences and readers alike used to only those of the realistic theatre.

Far from wallowing in self-pity or turning to total despair at the loss of ultimate certainties, the specialists of the Theatre of the Absurd try to make man bravely face up to the ultimate realities of the human condition; to make him confront the realities of the human situation as they are, courageously. It is their conviction that unless man faces the realities of the human condition as they are, he may be carried away by illusions likely to lead to inauthentic lives bound to produce maladjustments and frustrations. 'For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions – and to laugh at it' (Esslin: 429). The general subject matter of the Theatre of the Absurd as stated by Martin Esslin is an individual dramatist's perception of the human condition, his sense of being and vision of the world.

Coming to Bate Besong's plays after reading those of Epie Ngome and Bole Butake, one cannot fail noticing that here is somebody distinctly different, an avant-garde. For with Bate Besong, we are in the presence of the most modernist of all Cameroonian creative writers of English expression. Whether one is talking of his theatre or of his poetry, Besong has demonstrated more than anyone else that he has mastered the modernist mode of discourse. Indeed one would think that Bate Besong came straight into imaginative writing as though the conventional mode of writing had never existed; for, so far, he has not done any imaginative writing of significance outside the modernist mode.

He is a self-conscious writer determined to break with the past. A militant playwright with an obvious innovatory dramatic technique, Besong is continually experimenting and searching for new techniques of expression. In his theatre there is the general absence of those conventional sign-posts that, from practice and tradition, we have come to consider the very hallmarks of traditional drama. His plays do not contain a well-told story, nor a well-conceived chronological plot; there are neither well-depicted characters nor fully developed themes. His plots are akin to Samuel Beckett's, underscoring the inanity of human existence. He provides us with an admixture of the realistic, the historical, the tragic, the comic, all of this underlining a particular political ideology. He makes for difficult reading because of his abstruse style and rather adventurous use of dramatic technique, but this is exactly what makes him compulsive as we strive to discover his 'style de guerre'. (Doho 1993:98)

We will discuss Bate Besong's plays in the chronological order of their publication: *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie* (1986), *Beasts of No Nation* (1990), *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* (1998), *Change Waka & His Man Sawa Boy* (2001), *Once Upon Great Lepers* (ts), and *The Banquet* (ts). *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie*, hereafter to be occasionally and simply referred to as *Zombie*,¹ is a mixture of tragedy and comedy, an essentially two-man show, spiced with laughter, singing, clowning fighting, embracing, mutual up-braiding, dialogues, mime, speeches and torture, etc. Out of these emerge snippets of historical facts, places and personalities in connection with the history of Cameroon. The facts are not recounted in any chronological order, but rather emerge out of wide-ranging, and, sometimes, disjointed dialogues, speeches, songs and comments, etc. They include places like Foumban, Mantoum, Tcholliré, and concepts like plebiscite, referendum, reunification and integration; they comprise dead revolutionaries like Um Nyobe, Ernest Ouandie, Felix Roland Moumie; they consist of well-meaning but dead Anglophone heroes like S.A. George, A.N. Jua, P.M. Kale and Z.A. Abendong.

From the play it is obvious that the two central characters, Baba Toura and Badjika, represent the Francophone Ahidjo and the Anglophone Foncha respectively. But in places one sometimes feels

that Badjika can also be S.T. Muna. In any case the relationship between Toura and Badjika is like that of a master and a servant, or a rider and a horse. Out of the clowning bond, these two characters make some outrageous confessions as they occasionally address the audience. In the process they reveal their true political intentions and tactics, and their cruelty towards political enemies. From all this we gather that Baba Toura Worships France and adores her ambassador, and that radical Anglophones are dubbed secessionists. We gather that these dictators are in power thanks to foreign, neo-colonial masters and a vicious internal security system. Hence many prisons and concentration camps are talked of in the play. Commandante Yaro Amichive kills mercilessly and even licks human blood.

Two major themes emerge from all of these issues. One of them relates to an oppressive, brutal and totalitarian regime, very much under French neo-colonial influences. Its citizens are subjected to total fear, and everyone seems to be at the mercy of Yaro Amichive, head of the country's security network. Amichive the brute is feared even by the head of state himself (33). As such the former becomes something like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a paradoxical creature likely to destroy his own creator. We are equally reminded of Bero, the father-torturer of Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*. The regime is intolerant of any criticism, and its leader is deified, held as a demi-god by the stooges (13,18).

The other theme concerns the Francophone/Anglophone equation. In the relationship between Francophones and Anglophones, as represented by Toura and Badjika respectively, the Anglophones come off badly. The bond between them is more or less like that between teacher and pupil, master and servant, giver and taker or, to use Toura's own image, rider and horse. All this points to the fact that the Anglophone is totally dependent on the Francophone; that the latter is the owner of the yam and the knife, with all that this metaphor implies. Besides, the Anglophones face a grave danger of cultural annihilation when people like Toura begin to talk of 'cultural extermination victory' (16).

At the end of this drama there is no clear-cut message. The play is an exposure of the atrocities of the tyrants of the country, a preparation of the public to start talking in the open about the cruelty and harshness inflicted on them by their oppressors. Focus is also on French neo-colonial domination and Anglophone marginalization. Although there may be no precise radical message conveyed, it is implied in the form of the play. The self-revelation or confession by the dictators is subtly intended to make the audience aware of the ways of the tyrants and, perhaps, grow mad and do something. The nature of that thing is not made clear in *Zombie*, but it will be clearer and clearer in the next two plays.

As briefly stated earlier Bate Besong is an avant-garde and his innovative dramatic technique can best be appreciated if we grasp the meaning of this metaphor.

According to C. Hugh Holman (1980-41-42) the term 'avant-garde' is:

A military metaphor drawn from the French (vanguard, or van of an army) and applied to new writing that shows striking (and usually very self-conscious) innovations in Style, Form, and subject matter. The military origin of the term is appropriate for in every age the avant-garde (by what-ever-name it is known) makes a frontal and often an organized attack on the established forms and literary traditions of its time.

We can now see why, from this definition, Besong can be called an 'avant-garde'. While working basically within traditional drama, he has introduced new theatrical devices to make his play less conventional. Indeed the unconventional nature of the play, and the author's experimental intention can be inferred from the author's explanatory note below the play's title: 'a faery play in three parts...'

Thus the attentive reader is subtly alerted that this is not the normal, traditional play. *Zombie* has two main characters. But they are not the dignified, respectable characters of traditional drama. These are despicable lepers on crutches. Indeed, in the playwright's own words, they are 'ejected ... Leprous troglodytes, professional beggars.' Despite the presence of the two characters, however, there are no traditional contending forces, pitted against each other; and no clear conflicts in which we find a clash of ideologies and attitudes, whence a morality of some sort emerges.

But there are contending forces and conflicts in milder forms, implicit in the master-servant relationship between the characters and also apparent in the juxtaposition of the oppressors and the oppressed. This is only implicit because all that we know is told us through the confessions of the main characters. They tell us a great deal about their victims who never appear on the stage to confront them. By the same token we learn and hear of the groans and cries of Amichive's victims, but they never appear to challenge him.

There is no conventional plot with cause and effect as we find in Epie Ngome's *What God Has Put Asunder*. In fact in terms of immediacy, of the here-and-now, nothing much happens in *Zombie*. What we see are simply two actors who talk and banter, and sometimes clown and fight. And in the process they reveal their minds and natures.

Sometimes, with the use of the flashback technique, the playwright dives into the past and relays a few scenes involving these two characters, or speeches made by them. Such is also the case with some scenes in Part Two involving the cruelties of Amichive twenty-five years earlier. There is a bewildering shift of time in the play, taking us from the present to the past, sometimes immediate past or distant past, and then back to the present. This complicated technique of collapsing time can be disconcerting to people wont to following conventional chronology with minimal flashback.

An example of the author's disregard of the sequence of historical events is the last act of the play, Part Three, opening with reference to the U.N. organized plebiscite, the crucial political event that eventually brought the two parts of Cameroon together (64). Yet, from the various scenes and 'events' of the first two parts, we had already taken this for granted; we were already aware that we are here in a Cameroon involving Anglophones and Francophones. And just a few pages later (67), Toura is seen addressing the audience as an exiled leader.

Other devices of technique used by the dramatist include confessions, songs, irony, voices, mime, buffoonery and parody. In a way reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's *Brother Jero*, Bate Besong occasionally makes his characters confess to the audience. Confession is a revelation that, under certain circumstances, can

bring discomfort, harm or real shame to the confessor, something that can arouse the indignation of a certain section of the public against the confessor. There is no doubt that in employing this technique Bate Besong intends to create the same or similar effect on the audience. Toura confesses that his sweet-sounding planned liberalism really meant election without representation; a lesson, he says, he has learned from the French who could give you power without responsibility. We also learn from Toura's own mouth that national heroes like Um Nyobe were killed by the French colonial masters, aided by colonial agents. These confessions constitute astounding revelations likely to effect some behavioural changes in members of the audience.

From his own mouth Yaro Amichive admits that he is the devil incarnate, cruelty epitomized. His wickedness reminds us of that of C. Bero in Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*, another play that equally deals with African totalitarian regimes. His extreme pro-French inclination shows that for all his brutality, Yaro Amichive is only a neo-colonial stooge.

And as if to dismiss the population (including the audience itself) as a bunch of harmless cowards, Badjika tells the audience that the tyrants have succeeded in dominating them because 'The population is too cowed to demand their rights. They have respect for the man with the hammer hand. 'Brutalized victims of French colonial anaemia! (69). Talk like this is likely to transform the audience at the end of the play. Many people are likely to go away changed, because they have been subtly educated in the vicious ways of their cruel leaders. In short the audience is likely to be more critical of the behaviour of their rulers.

Another theatrical device is the incorporation of songs. Since these are songs composed under a totalitarian regime, many of them carry very suggestive titles like 'Ballad of a Party Cadre,' (9) 'Song of the Youthful Militant,' (29) 'Song of the Great Fatherland,' (60) 'Song of the Party Stooge,' (69).

These and the other songs not quoted dwell on two main issues: the praise of the head of state and the threat of death and torture to his critics and detractors. In this regard the dominant image in the satirical songs is torture, pain or death. This emerges out of several images used by the playwright like balançoire, bazooka,

napalm, machine gun, gun-powder, cement, power, etc. The songs are the creations of the kind of mentality that produces dictators, or that encourages the emergence of presidents for life, a phenomenon that, until recently, had been fashionable in some parts of Africa. Thematically, therefore, the songs reinforce aspects of the central issues of the play, hence their dramatic function and effectiveness.

The next technique employed by Bate Besong is parody, a satirical device of writing in a critical and, sometimes, comic imitation of something else. The speeches made at the Congress of the Peace Game are satirical imitations of the sycophantic, grandiloquent orations produced at the real CNU congresses during President Ahidjo's reign. Of course since he is an artist and writing in a critical and comic vein, Bate Besong does not pretend to be reproducing any historical speeches as such. But students of Cameroon politics and history would agree that these comic and critical imitations are a fair reflection of the spirit of the historical ones; that though they are not, and need not be, the real thing, they come close to the thing. A few excerpts from some of them will suffice:

(a)

... This gathering, Your Excellency, is all the more so moving so exciting as it reminds us of the fact that we are meeting here to discuss the perennial havoc of your enemies, the nation's enemies ... to determine the best manner in which we intend to become immortalized through ... The Unity which America and the world lacks! (12-13)

(b)

Your Excellency in this congress of the mastery of our Peace plans, under your clear vision – Human behaviour among many factors – as you have often said, may, change the course of events. According to experts, under your messianic helmsmanship, Your Excellency; the only solution is to take steps here and now to reduce the fertility rate so that in the year 2000 we may have an average of 3 subversive children per marquis family instead of 6. In this way, the overall population growth

will continue at a tortoise-pace. The population of the sanitized nation would then be 18 million in the year 2000 ...

By making it a point of duty to selflessly preside over these meetings and in an atmosphere of frank and fatherly dialogue, Planned Liberalism was born (*sustained applause*) ... Long Live His Excellency the Most High Prince of Peace Dr. El Hadji Toura ibn Adu Al Sallah! Long Live His Children of Paradise these Militants of the Island of Peace and the Envy of Non-Militants. May Touralogy Flourish! (19)

(c)

Toura: ... Dear Comrades, unfortunately, we do not only have to face the maleficent machinations and whorish enticements of wicked ideological blocks; we must arm ourselves as never before against the subversive activities of our own ungrateful prodigals both at home and abroad who aid and abet those who greedily thirst for domination with the hope of bringing about a total Gomorrah of the fine structure of unity, stability and progress which we are patiently endeavouring to nurture. Dear comrades, we are aware of the subversive activities the false and coarse propaganda of demented dreamers (*coughs*) and ambitious persons (*coughs*) who from their voluntary exile (*coughs*) itch with venomous nostalgia to bomb our irrepressible love for a system which propagates stability and social justice, which ensures our country's influence in major decisions in the Security Council and the Elysée (*bows towards French Ambassador*) as well as the total liquidation of our enemies (*sustained applause*). Dear comrades, we have organized ourselves (*prolonged applause*) in a way that we can continue to forge ahead without the envious dreamers ... because we are aware and sure of our popularity and legitimacy. (20)

In the sense that excerpts (a) and (b) are obvious pieces by stooges flattering the Messiah while planning what to do to his enemies, their speeches are the prose equivalents of the satirical songs mentioned above. Notice the multiple titles and fulsome praises heaped on the head of state. Of course, we must regard the idea of punishing the enemies, of curbing their fertility rate so that there will be 'an average of 3 subversive children per marquis family instead of 6' as a mere extension of the vicious fantasy of the party stooges, a reflection of the types of secret but wicked projects likely to be conceived by evil genius. Some may scoff at this idea as simply unrealistic. But given the kind of regime we are dealing with here, and given scientific breakthroughs in modern bio-technology, such a proposition is not an impossibility. The third and the last excerpt, excerpt (c), punctuated with coughing, is one that will remind adult Cameroonians of late President Ahidjo's cough-interrupted speeches.

We have said that in their confessions to the audience the main characters state some hard facts. But sometimes Toura is telling either an outright lie or he is simply talking with his tongue-in-cheek:

Toura: We can state without false modesty that we have brought power close to the ordinary peasant. No more chasing of files in the Sisyphean labyrinths of Yaoundé. A colonial hangover meant to de-personalize, humiliate and deprive a man of his humanity. In one small, tiny decree, we have done away with one neronian lunacy of the French ... We have published the accounts of oil. And Equivalence is no longer a Herculean mystery which, like Integration divides the nation into two (*pause*). (67)

Now when Toura, the head of a totalitarian, reactionary regime openly says that they have brought power closer to the ordinary peasant, whereas the audience knows that this is not true; when he declares that there is no more chasing of files in Yaoundé, whereas the reverse is true; when he claims that they have opened the oil accounts to public scrutiny, whereas the audience knows that the

government has been tight-lipped concerning petrol figures; when he says Equivalence is no longer a problem, whereas it is still a nightmare to those concerned; so when Toura says all this and more, whether he is lying or just being ironical, there is an alienation effect on the audience: they are jolted and put in a questioning, critical mood. For they do not identify with Toura's so-called achievements.

Toura is toying with the people's secret wishes. The playwright is using Toura to remind the audience of the things that they deserve but do not have; that they ought to desire but have not demanded. He is reminding them, albeit subtly, of some of their basic rights for which they ought to stand up. Consequently, the author may like to believe that at the end of such a performance the audience would have known better, if they had not done so before. Once more this relates to the pedagogy of the oppressed, hence the effectiveness of the alienation effect.

From all that we have analysed above, we can safely say that Bate Besong's dramatic technique reveals a rich and fertile imagination. But we must also admit that the unconventional techniques used by him engender obscurantism, leading to comprehension difficulty, a characteristic not limited to *Zombie* alone but one evident in all of his plays. From a purely technical consideration *Zombie* suffers from poor production quality, particularly with regard to the lay-out of the work and the uneven quality of the printing ink, a technical flaw eliminated in Besong's later works produced by well-established publishers. With regard to the texture of *Zombie* Chris Dunton (1998:51) says 'elsewhere the material is so wild and fragmentary (a dialogue modelled on Beckett, but with the characters in the throes of a fit) the effect is bleakly disturbing.'

The dramatic situation in *Beasts of No Nation*², to be occasionally referred to simply as *Beasts*, is this: On the one hand we have night-soil men, the doomed carriers of mountains of fetid waste of Ednouay City Council asking for their freedom and professional cards; on the other there is the Mayor of Ednouay Municipal Council, Aadingingin, refusing to grant them these rights. It all starts off with the night-soil men, as the play opens, asking for freedom from the narrator, the hypocritical Votary of Freedom and Liberty. But he tells them to make their complaint through the proper channels; that they should pass through Chef Lazare Gaston Otshama.

The issue of the professional IDs is taken up again in the dialogue between the Blindman and the Cripple who parody Aadingingin and Otshama respectively. Here Otshama tells Aadingingin that without their professional cards the night-soil men will not be able to march, nor will they be integrated. They may be forced to write petitions. But according to Aadingingin IDs or no IDs 'Anglos' always write petitions anyway. And here we are explicitly told that the night-soil men (NSM) are Anglophones.

Otshama, however, insists, suggesting a compromise. The mayor then says that the NSM should write an application and attach one million francs fiscal stamp to each. When we meet the real Otshama and Aadingingin towards the end of the play, it is to hear the former telling the latter, in a tone of voice strongly reminiscent of Professor Okong and Attorney General, flattering His Excellency in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, that the NSM regret their past behaviour and are penitent, although they still insist on being given their IDs.

But Aadingingin bitterly complains that he is working within an austere budgetary allocation; that with a budget of 500 million francs, with 350 million going for toilet tissue, and 100 million for izar disinfectants, there is hardly anything left, because 'S.A.P. will give me no breath.' He gives Otshama a fat envelope and tells him to promise the NSM that they will be millionaires and even billionaires after death; but that when Otshama has done this, he should kill them.

He is just about to dismiss Otshama when the NSM storm his office with buckets full of excrement. Aadingingin, mad at the NSM pulls out an automatic pistol and fires at them, killing Otshama. Alone on the stage Aadingingin proclaims, 'My word is double law. I AM THE LAW'

The issues and themes emerging from *Beasts of No Nation* are essentially economic, political, cultural and social. Ednouay is a city economically ruined by its administrators led by the Supreme Mayor, Aadingingin. The Structural Adjustment Programme, S.A.P., coupled with the wasteful flamboyant life style of the big directors, is taking its toll on the citizens, especially the night-soil men. City council money is shamelessly and recklessly embezzled. The embezzlers put up storey buildings and buy expensive, status-symbol cars like pajeros, etc.

The playwright pictures the city administrators not only as money spenders but as 'money eaters'. Money is thus seen as something edible, as food which is then ingested and passed out as waste matter – shit. And there is a great amount of this in the city. That is why Ednouay is considered the most expensive dung-heap in Africa; this explains why most of the city budget is reserved for the clearing up of waste, the colossal sum of 450 million out of 500 million being set aside just for toilet tissues and disinfectant! Thus Ednouay City Council administrators are brazen, unconscionable embezzlers who not only spirit away the city money to European banks but are not ashamed to hide some of it in the ceilings of their homes.

Politically we have again the Anglophone/Francophone equation. In contemporary Anglophone imagination and consciousness the word 'frog', a pejorative term used several times in the play, stands for the Francophone. As we remarked above, the parodied Aadingingin clearly referred to the night-soil men as 'Anglos', another derogatory word and the shortened form of Anglophones. The simple dramatic conflict analysed above thus points to the fact that the NSM symbolize Anglophones subjected by Francophone leadership, in whose hands lie political power and money. The play makes it clear that the frogs are the great consumers while Anglos are confined to the mean, undignified role of carriers of the waste matter passed out by their masters.

We agree with Peter-Abety (1996:255) that by extension the 'Night-soil men' may symbolize more than just Anglophones; that they can 'also represent the workers without whom society will come to a standstill.' However, following the logic of the play and the overtones of its social setting, we stress that the NSM are first and foremost Anglophone Cameroonians before they are something else.

In vain the Anglos ask for their freedom and also their identity cards, issues of great symbolic significance. For they stand for Anglophone basic demands including their cultural identity. Without them the Anglophones run the risk of being assimilated into the greater Francophone culture. The stiff resistance put up against these demands by those in authority in the play speaks volumes for what was happening in the 1990s in the Cameroonian society with regard to pressure groups like Cameroon Anglophone Movement, CAM; All Anglophone Conference, AAC; Teachers' Association of

Cameroon, TAC; and the drawn-out war of nerves between TAC and the government over the G.C.E. Board issue, all of which are real symbols of Anglophone identity and culture.

Shit, excrement, fetid waste and the stench conveyed in the play (1, 25, 37), almost suffocating the actors and audience, are a measure of the near-collapse to which the reckless administrators of Ednouay have brought the entire society; indeed, in this regard the city is simply hanging precariously on a precipice that can give way at anytime unless something serious is done. 'The ubiquitous nightsoil metaphor that pervades the entire play is a grim and sardonic commentary on a society at the brink of total chaos, a nation engulfed in its own grotesque self-destruction' (Ba'bila Mutia). If one spells Ednouay from right to left, one has the political capital of Cameroon, Yaoundé. The latter becomes a synecdoche, representing the whole of Cameroon.

Bate Besong's recurrent theme of torture is not absent in this play; everything in the drama points to the fact that we are in a dictatorial regime even if the degree of political torture here is less than that in *Zombie*. The very first words from Aadingingin's mouth are those of threat, intimating torture. The mayor's ruthlessness is seen in his merciless gunning down of his own henchman, Otshama.

Let us round up this section of our discussion with an appreciation, or should we say, an interpretation of *Beasts of No Nation* by a government functionary who watched it when it premièred in Yaoundé. The personality, J.S. Biatcha, is a Francophone and, in our opinion, his is the best interpretation ever to have come from the side of the regime in power. We here quote Biatcha's reaction in French, a letter addressed to the Chancellor of the University of Yaoundé, followed by our English translation:

A l'occasion des rencontres théâtrales de Yaoundé, le théâtre Universitaire Anglophone dirigé par Monsieur BOLE BUTAKE, a représenté la pièce intitulée 'Beach (sic) of NO Nation' de BATE BESSONG (sic) le 26 mars 1991 à 21 heures, dans l'amphithéâtre '700' de l'Université de Yaoundé.

Cette représentation à laquelle j'ai assisté appelle les observations ci-après:

Il s'agit d'un véritable pamphlet politique dirigé contre le régime en place qui est tenu pour responsable de la crise économique par la corruption; le favoritisme, et l'exportation des capitaux vers les banques étrangères.

L'auteur soutient que les Francophones au pouvoir sont responsables de la crise économique parce qu'ils entretiennent la gabegie et les détournements des fonds. Parmi les francophones (frogs), un accent particulier est mis sur les Beti, amis et frères du Président Biya, qui sont plus responsables de l'état actuel du Cameroun.

L'auteur affirme également, et ceci est la philosophie principale de la pièce, que 'les Anglophones au Cameroun, sont marginalisés et confinés dans des rôles indignes comme celui de 'ramasseurs d'excréments'. Ils n'ont aucun statut propre et sont même dépourvus de toute carte d'identité professionnelle, qu'ils réclament sans succès.

Pour Monsieur BESSONG (sic), l'Anglophone au Cameroun est considéré comme un traître et un esclave. La pièce s'achève par une incitation à la révolte et au refus de l'ordre régnant. A la fin de la représentation, l'auteur de cette pièce est monté sur scène pour déclarer publiquement que l'avenir au Cameroun est énigmatique et que le chaos peut intervenir à tout moment, surtout de l'autre côté du Moungo. Il a par conséquent lancé un appel à l'audience, à prédominance Anglophone, pour qu'elle sache se mobiliser en vue d'opérer ses choix.

Après avoir enduré cette pièce, j'ai dû en guise de protestation, me lever, accompagné du Chef du Service des Associations et Clubs Culturels Estudiantins pour quitter la salle, au moment où Monsieur BESSONG (sic) terminait ses propos incendiaires de la fin.

Lorsque nous quitions l'Amphithéâtre '700', j'ai été hué par les 'man no run' et 'Owona' 'Owona'.

Je pense, pour ma part, qu'au moment où des efforts constants et soutenus sont déployés par les pouvoirs publics pour faire du Cameroun un pays uni où les deux communautés cohabitent en toute fraternité, il est anormal et inadmissible que des intellectuels aiguisent et favorisent la scission et les conflits. En tout cas l'Université ne devrait pas servir de forum à ce genre d'entreprises mal intentionnées.

Malheureusement, le programme des rencontres théâtrales qui a été conçu par le Ministère de l'Information et de la Culture ne nous a pas permis de lire au préalable cette pièce dont j'ai acheté une copie, à la sortie de l'Amphithéâtre.

A la lecture de cette pièce, je me suis d'ailleurs rendu compte que certains passages ont été modifiés par Mr. BOLE BUTAKE dans le sens d'une réactualisation pour rendre ce pamphlet plus caustique.

Cette expérience qui est, il faut l'avouer, assez choquante et décevante servira de leçon avantagée de vigilance à l'occasion de toutes les autres manifestations culturelles qui se dérouleront dans le campus universitaire.

Jean Stéphane Biatcha (1991:11)

(Our Translation)

Biatcha's Letter

On the occasion of Yaoundé theatre performances, the Anglophone University theatre, directed by Mr. Bole Butake staged a play entitled *Beasts of No Nation* by Bate Besong on March 26, 1991 at 9 p.m. in Amphi '700' of Yaoundé University.

The performance, which I watched, calls for the following observations:

It is a clear political pamphlet directed at the regime in power, that is held responsible for the Economic Crisis through corruption, favouritism and capital flight to foreign banks.

The author holds the thesis that Francophones in power are responsible for the Economic crisis because they are producers of waste and embezzlers of public funds.

Among the Francophones (frogs) special emphasis is placed on the Betis, friends and brothers of President Biya, who are more responsible for the present state of Cameroon.

The author equally affirms, and this is the central thesis of the play, that 'the Anglophones of Cameroon are marginalized and confined to undignified roles like that of 'carriers of excrements'. They do not have any professional identity cards, which they are asking for in vain.

According to Mr. Besong, the Anglophone in Cameroon is considered a traitor and a slave. The play ends with an appeal for rebellion and the defiance of the present regime. At the end of the performance the playwright took to the stage to publicly declare that the future of Cameroon is uncertain and that chaos can set in at any time, especially from the other side of the Mungo. Consequently, he appealed to the audience, for the most part Anglophones, to get themselves ready in order to carry out their choices.

After enduring this play, I had to get up, by way of protest, accompanied by the Chief of Service for Students' Associations and Cultural Clubs, to quit the hall just at the time when Mr. Besong was concluding his fiery exhortations at the end.

While we were leaving the hall, I was booed in these words: ‘man no run’ ‘Owona Owona’. I think, in my opinion, that at the time when the government is exerting great and constant efforts to make Cameroon a united country where the two communities coexist in all brotherliness it is abnormal and unacceptable that intellectuals should promote divisions and conflicts. In any case, the University ought not to be the forum for such ill-intentioned ventures.

Unfortunately, the programme of theatre activities that was conceived by the Ministry of Information and Culture did not allow us to preview this play, a copy of which I bought at the exit of the Amphitheatre.

On reading this play, I even realized that some passages have been altered by Mr. Bole Butake to make the play more current and critical. This experience which, I must admit, is shocking and disappointing enough will serve as a lesson for the future and will help me to be more vigilant and diligent with regard to all the other cultural activities that will take place on the university campus.

Jean Stéphane Biatcha

In this play, while Bate Besong is still essentially avant-gardist in his technique, he has dropped some of the devices that appeared in *Zombie* and made use of new ones. While the devices of direct address of the audience, the use of songs, parody and symbolism still feature in the new play, the complicated flashback technique and the plotlessness of the earlier play have been dropped. Some of the new theatrical devices worked into the second play are the use of a narrator, the ringing of the bell to keep the audience alert and attentive and, above all, the shocking of the audience through the shit image and the actors’ indecent exposure of their behinds to ‘foul up the air’.

The summary given above shows that with regard to plot Bate Besong has tilted more towards traditional drama here than he did in the earlier play. There is some dramatic conflict generated by the

persistent demands of the Anglos and the firm rejection by the authorities. Tension and suspense are thus created. Technically speaking this is more than we noticed in *Zombie*.

There are also more characters in the second play than in the first. Aadingingin is simply one dimensional, a mere type. Each time we hear him talking, only a particular brand of language comes out of his mouth relating to torture and brutality. But in the Narrator we have a character with the potential for complexity. At one time he gives you the impression that he is morally upright whereas in reality he is not. He is frank to point out the wickedness and weaknesses of the City of Ednouay; however, he himself is not totally free from fostering the evil. He is the votary of Freedom and Liberty; yet, he would not grant liberty and freedom to struggling NSM. The Narrator is, therefore, a pure hypocrite, intellectually strong but morally weak. He seems to represent those pseudo-intellectuals who would make conventional noises about the atrocities of a political regime while sustaining the very system, for want of moral fibre to stand up for their conviction. In this regard his often-repeated statement, 'A hero goes to war to die' is an empty slogan.

The night-soil men are nameless people, sometimes simply called Anglos; no wonder, they are struggling for an identity. It is symbolically significant that they are not given specific names, for it amounts to saying that they are unimportant, invisible, hence their marginalized status that J.S. Biatcha spoke of.

As for the Cripple and the Blindman, they are used in the same manner that Bate Besong uses the lepers and 'troglodytes' of the first play: to convey the meaning that the world of this play, like that of the previous one, is under the control of deformed and ugly things like cripples, blindmen and lepers. It is therefore a world whose values, like their rulers, have gone awry, an essentially immoral world.

The moral rottenness of this world is what Bate Besong successfully conveys almost palpably through the image of 'shit' and all the smell and foulness it emits. This is done through the concrete buckets of excrement present on the stage and the actual act of the actors turning their backs towards the audience, lifting their clothes and then 'answering nature's call.'

By and large the dominant image that emerges in this play of Ednouay City is that of a huge lavatory, an expensive dung-heap. It is the image of an environment where, with the recurrent evocation of filth and occasional mention of neologisms such as ‘shitology’ and ‘excrementology’, human excretory waste has been raised to a science to an extent that some city dwellers are ‘workers in the tortuous scholarship of excrementology’ (34). In this regard Bole Butake says this of Bate Besong, that

He is so violently angry with the wrongs and injustices done to the Anglophone community in our society in particular that he vomits nothing but filth and shit. He is our shitologist *par excellence* (Butake 1996:25).

It is probably the handling of shocking imagery of filth such as this by Besong that might have provoked the following comment from Tatah H. Mbuy at which the playwright took umbrage:

... we sadly inform Bate Besong that if we have not sung the *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, it is because a good number could not join the chorus too loudly without curiously complaining about the stench coming out of their own mouths (Mbuy 1993:88).

The device of extreme shock is intended to jolt members of the audience out of their complacency to re-examine their social situation and pay greater attention to the issues raised in the play. The shocking effect certainly did not send away the audience in the middle of the play as we saw above in Biatcha’s testimony. He himself sat through it and rose up to go away only when it had ended. And what an insightful interpretation of the play he made later on! Hence the effectiveness of the shock device.

Like in *Zombie* there are songs in *Beasts* that equally deal with some of the central issues raised. But, unlike those of *Zombie* all written in standard English, the songs in *Beasts* are mostly in pidgin English, the language of the common man, the lingua franca of Cameroon. This linguistic simplification translates Bate Besong’s desire to get to the level of the people, the masses, to communicate his message to the greatest number of people possible. We quote here just three of the songs:

Song of the Prodigal: (a)

Goat di chop
For place weh
Dey tie him

Goat di wack
For place weh
Dey be tie him
If I die
I go come back
If I quench
I go come back
So my dear frog—
Brother wack
And burn
This damnbrubah Ednouay
Dear frog-brother
Wack and burn
This damnbrubah Ednouay

For seeka goat
Di chop
For place weh
Dey be tie him (12-13)

(The Night-soil-men sing): (b)
solo:

How many million
Promises can
Fill a basket?

How many million
Promises can ever
Fill a basket?

all:
When you eat money
The way locusts
Eat tonnes of green,

When frogs eat money
The way locusts
Eat tons of green. (13): (c)

solo:

I fit tief
One hundred million
I fit tief
Five thousand million sef.

chorus:

Because my umbrella
Dey for capital city
Because my umbrella
De for Ednouay city.

solo:

I fit bury
One thousand million
For my ceiling
I fit bury même
Ten thousand million
For my ceiling

chorus:

Because Ednouay city
Done spoil-oh
Because Ednouay city
Done spoil-oh (15-16)

Songs (a) and (b) highlight, through the images of a goat browsing where it is tethered and of swarms of locusts consuming tonnes of green vegetation, the issue of ‘frogs’ in authority spending or wasting away the nation’s wealth with reckless abandon. Song (c) on its part talks plainly of the issue of stealing and hiding, even in the ceiling, of huge sums of money. Incidentally this reference, like the one in which a character in the play refers to the idea of fifty officials going to the Seoul Olympics with five athletes, is an allusion, if with a slight exaggeration, to actual recent occurrences in Cameroon.

While addressing the NSM the Narrator occasionally turns to the audience with great effect. For example, when he tells the audience: 'There is no future for you. Open rebuke is better than secret love', the impact is real on many members of the audience; and it is even more so when those members are Anglos, following the logic of the play.

The device of parody gives the playwright the opportunity to satirise certain greedy members of the ruling clique interested only in grabbing and consuming. They profess patriotism with their mouths only but when called upon to sacrifice in concrete terms for the economic health of the nation their patriotism sounds hollow:

- Narrator: (*Solemnly*)
Now, comrade
And honourable, saintly, martyred,
Venerable Militant, I want each of
You especially the drop-out Priests amongst
you;
I want each of you to donate Twenty
percent of
Your hoarded money to revamp our leprous
Economy.
- Cripple: (*as rich militant, indignantly*)
For what?
- Blindman: I beg no come
Die for my hand
Na crisis I go chop?
- Cripple: I love Ednouay
But does Ednouay love me?
(*They exist as a group indignantly*)
- Narrator: Things have just got to change
(*goes down to the audience*)
Were you reading my mind? A
Simple ceremony of sprinkling
And the rich beasts of no nation
Flee to a man ... (27-28).

We can end this section by saying that technically speaking in *Beasts of No Nation* our ‘experimentalist playwright’ has improved considerably. There is a greater desire to be more and more articulate, to highlight a clear issue and convey a precise message. It is for this reason that he has dropped the plotlessness and the bewildering flashback technique of the earlier play and consequently its obscurantism.

While in *Zombie* the dictators rule supreme and the voiceless victims are simply mercilessly disposed of by the repressive machinery, and while the Anglophone/Francophone equation is more or less barely stated and not debated, in *Beasts of No Nation* the oppressed are given a voice. They actively and persistently ask for their rights and, at the end, even carry the fight to the dreaded Mayor’s office, storming it with their buckets of excrement, an audacious act of significance, indeed. It means that to get something from a reactionary regime one must fight for it and be ready to risk one’s life in the process.

In *Beasts of No Nation* we have in the ‘shit’ imagery a significant symbol of moral rottenness. And the Bate Besong we find here is, to some extent, close to Ayi Kwei Armah, the angry author of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* whose pervading image is filth too. For all its fetidness and stench, however, *Beats of No Nation* is a more optimistic play than *Zombie*. It ends on a slight note of hope, subtly pointing to a possible direction of action by the oppressed. But if this way is only subtle in *Beasts of No Nation*, it is even more clearly indicated in the third play by Bate Besong; in it Besong’s message is crystal clear, and to it, we now turn.

The play *Requiem for The Last Kaiser*,³ to be also occasionally referred to as *Requiem*, consists of three scene fragments, and two movements. The first fragment opens with a woman educating a student to take part in fighting the repressive forces in Agidigidi, and the second reveals that Atangana, a clergyman, collaborates with the reactionary regime of Abossollo as the security boss of the regime and therefore, one who controls the instruments of torture. He accuses Woman of subversion and of planning a coup d’état. But Woman says ‘ours will be a popular uprising not a coup’ (16). Atangana the Pastor cautions her: ‘Be careful woman ... Don’t let the Devil mark you ... Trust and obey’ (16). In the last fragment

we see Akhikrikikii, the head of state, in the company of his foreign friends and supporters: a Western Ambassador and a Swiss Banker, all of whom flatter him.

In the first scene of the first movement we meet the progressive forces, made up of unemployed academics like Akonchong and Gambari, Poet as Mandela, workers, voice of Woman, etc. There is a parody by the academics in which the regime is subtly satirized. The scene ends with Abossollo threatening critics and enemies of the regime. In the second scene of the first movement we meet the progressive forces again, including the leader of the market women, Woman and soldiers. We notice the education of the soldiers by Woman in the interest of the oppressed. There is the play within the play, wherein the academics play the role of head porters, etc. Here the cruel ways and weaknesses of the regime are subtly criticized and exposed. There is the reading of the revolutionary thesis by Akonchong, and then Abossollo arrives in a threatening mood with a gun, but he is disarmed by the people.

In the second and last movement we find the people – the progressive forces: the poet, former infantry men, women, workers, etc., surrounding Akhikrikikii's Marble Palace. There is a general revolt, and Ngongo, the chief praise-singer of the regime, confesses his crime against the people. Worst of all Abossollo too, without the army, abandons Akhikrikikii. But the Ambassador and the Swiss Banker still stick around him. However, deserted by his people, Akhikrikikii commits suicide and the people, the progressive forces, force their way into the Marble Palace.

The central theme of this play is the popular challenge to a dictatorial regime, or a popular up-rising against a dictatorship. In fact, this theme is already didactically summed up by the author in the play's sub-title 'a drama of conscientisation and revolution.'

Conscientisation implies the education of the masses, especially the oppressed masses, in such a way that they become imbued with a heightened sense of critical consciousness. When oppressed people become conscientised, they tend to know more about certain issues and situations than they did before. They become more familiar with the inner structure of their society and the dynamics of the vicious system that has held them captives. The knowledge of this produces a change in behaviour in such a way as to make them now

want to do away with the evil forces that have helped to cripple them. Thus for every vicious action, so to speak, by the oppressors, there is not only an equal and opposite, but, in radical terms, a superior opposite reaction by the oppressed, whose ultimate goal is the improved living condition of the masses.

This trend of reasoning reveals that Bate Besong has been influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by Marxist thought, at least as far as *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* is concerned. Marxism, the political and economic philosophy founded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, holds that history is primarily determined by economics. It regards the history of any society, with the exception of that of primitive communalism, as the history of class struggle. Marxism stands strongly opposed to capitalism which it seeks to topple, replacing it with socialism.

But to be able to do so, Marxists must first educate the oppressed in the dynamics and nature of capitalism, the economic philosophy that upholds the private ownership of property and the means of production, and encourages individual initiative, spirit of competition and the profit motive or accumulation of wealth. 'Marxism's goal is liberation of consciousness and freeing of praxis from bondage via revolutionary theory'. (Solomon 1973:14) For a real revolution to take place, the people's consciousness must be transformed; there must be a change of mentalities. The people must be prepared, educated and ideologically sound. In other words, there must be a genuine pedagogy of the deprived for critical awareness.

And this pedagogical mission is essentially Bate Besong's intention in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, as implied by the sub-title: a drama for conscientisation and revolution. Although it would be too sweeping to classify Bate Besong as an avowed Marxist, his radical intention makes the application of Marxist critical approach to the analysis of his play inevitable.

Talking about literature and ideology, the Russian Marxist, Plekhanov, says no literary work is conceived in an ideological vacuum; that all art emanates from an ideological conception of the world. (Eagleton 19786:17) The veracity of this statement can be illustrated from *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, for the brief outline of the play with which we opened this section clearly bears this out.

There are two distinct ideologies locked in a fierce confrontation. On the one hand, we have an oppressive, exploitative and essentially capitalist or bourgeois way of life represented by Akhikrikirii and his tribal clique including the Western Ambassador and the Swiss Banker. Agidigidi is a neo-colonial state, and Akhikrikirii, a neo-colonial agent, subjected to easy manipulation by his European neo-colonial masters. The consequence of this neo-colonial stranglehold on the state of Agidigidi is the cruel exploitation and pauperization of the masses for the benefit of the local ruling clique and compradors, and their foreign masters. The latter's survival depends on their keeping things as they are, admitting neither radical changes nor non-conformist tendencies. As a result of this, their administration is characterized by coercion, threat, imprisonment and torture.

On the other hand, there are the exploited, the oppressed represented by Woman, Student, Poet, workers, market women, the unemployed academics and former infantrymen. As a group they constitute the progressive forces, working for a change of the status quo. Their approach is basically radical, and their general attitude, socialist. They are out to seize power from the tyrannical minority and give it to the people. This comes through to the audience from the steady education given by Woman to the student and soldiers in particular and the sensitization of the masses in general.

Woman and Dr. Akonchong roughly represent theory; the student, soldiers and other workers, the potential for action. The ones represent reflection, the others, praxis. Thus brain and brawn become necessary for a successful revolution.

Requiem for the Last Kaiser is a product of its society, having been informed by the social, political and historical conditions of Cameroon under the New Deal Regime. Bate Besong fully subscribes to a central Marxist principle that literature is socially conditioned. In his own words '... literature must be inspired by a historical myth-informed consciousness. It must embody in bold relief the specific historical features of the entire Cameroonian reality. We must not evade the issues raised by economic, social and political change.' (Quoted in Ngwane 1993:36) And his literary works are an exemplum of his words. His plays are artistic creations inspired by the Cameroon experience. They are the transformation into art of social, political, economic, cultural and ideological issues pertinent to the Cameroonian reality.

Making allowances for the playwright's poetic licence, and his fertile imagination, all that goes on in the neo-colonial state of Agidigidi is generally true of our present day society. Some of the statements made by the fictional Akhikrikikii like: 'The people understand me very well. I also understand them, Je vous ai compris' (1), belong to his historical counterpart. Even names like Abossollo, Atangana, Ngongo, etc, in Cameroon are easily identified with ethnic groups with close affinities to the dominant ruling class. The topicality, currency and, consequently, the sensitivity of Bate Besong's material can be seen from J.S. Biatcha's visceral reaction translated above.

Requiem for the Last Kaiser is a reflection and also reinforcement of the contemporary critical attitude of many Cameroonians who, thanks to a lively private press, are no longer afraid of sticking out their neck for political change.

As an Anglophone Cameroonian, Bate Besong writes with the burden of the Anglophone Problem frequently on his mind. We saw all that in the two previous plays. In *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* the issue of 'Anglos' being integrated into the larger Francophone society is raised in the parody scene where Gambari asks: 'Anglos what are your grievances against National integration then?'

On his part Akonchong says:

'We have recruited Frenchmen of sciences to civilize you yet your secessionist brains have rejected all medicines ... What is your grievance ... Ph.D. Doctor ... Too much English ... Too much anglais-Biafré!' (34) In Cameroon the word Biafré or Biafran is a code term for Anglophones, and in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* the unemployed academics, are 'pseudo-Biafrans'. This is made clear to the audience through an aside by Abossollo in the parody scene, with reference to Gambari and Akonchong, 'Pseudo-Biafrans are excellent in the evil art of mockery' (36)

Bate Besong draws on both the Anglophone experience and his personal plight; for as a civil servant he has been roughly treated by the system. The anger we find in his plays is partly the bitterness inspired by the frustration the man has known not only as an Anglophone in general but as a bruised individual in particular. In Besong's own words: 'The Anglophone Cameroonian Writer must

never forget his origins. His writing must depict the conditions of his people, expressing their spontaneous feelings of betrayal, protest and anger.' (Besong 1993:18) George Ngwane has expressed the situation very well in these words:

You cannot read Bate Besong without knowing the man. He is a unified personality. The artist and the man are one. The conflict in his writings is the drama of his life; and so he brings his life at times to the centre of his writings, for his plight is a reflection of the predicament of a people and a nation. A nation that has held him to ransom. At times we even wonder whether Bate Besong is angry with the system or angry with himself. When we laugh at his caricatures, we are in fact laughing, this time, with compassion at the author's plight. His haughty use of humour and hyperbole does not water down his rage against society, for when a society is deaf one must shout for it to listen. When a government puts a writer with a Master's degree on Index O category O, such a writer cannot afford the luxury of polite language. When a government pays a Master's degree holder (at least by the time I am writing this piece) 144.000 francs per month before the new salary slash thereby losing close to two million francs per year for eight years today, such a writer has no alternative but to vent his personal anger on a public podium. In spite of this, Bate Besong's life is a testament of hope and his writings, a source of inspiration. (Ngwane 1993:36)

As a realistic work *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* reveals a quality valued in Marxist criticism – that of 'the world historical'. According to Georg Lukács a realistic work is one rich in complex relations between man, nature and history. These relations embody and reveal what is most typical about a particular phase of history. What Lukács refers to as typical are the 'Latent forces that in every society are the most significantly historical and progressive and that expose society's inner structure and dynamic.' (Eagleton 1976:28) The duty of the realist writer is to flesh out these typical trends and forces in sensuously realized characters and actions.

In this play these forces include the forces of oppression and exploitation, incarnated by Akhikrikriki and his clique with their neo-colonial masters, on the one hand, and the progressive forces made up of the exploited, on the other. When the oppressors, standing firmly in the way of change, are confronted with the oppressed, bent on routing out the tyrants, then there develops a tense situation likely to explode with serious repercussions. For as Wole Soyinka says 'he who makes peaceful change impossible makes violent change inevitable.'

In their sensuously fleshed-out forms, these characters are bound to generate actions and reactions likely to produce historically significant social outcomes imbued with the power of 'world-historical'; that is, events with the power to create or influence history. To the extent that these forces make things different, especially in favour of the masses as shown by their forceful and successful occupation of the Marble Palace, its former occupant having committed suicide, they are progressive.

The progressive forces in the play, the proletariat and others, are quite aware that they are making history; that they are working towards a change, the change of the status quo. 'We want nothing! We have come to hear you die! Only your blood can cleanse this land!' (58). In the words of Woman, 'Down with the robbers of the people! Power to the people!'

A key principle in Marxist criticism is commitment of art to the cause of the proletariat, putting art in the service of pressing social issues. In all his writings: his poetry, polemical essays, drama and even in his life-style, Bate Besong reveals himself as a man profoundly committed to the welfare of his Cameroonian community in general and the Anglophone environment in particular. He comes through to the reader as a man whose breast is full of the milk of human kindness, a fierce defender of the rights of the down-trodden. Indeed he has come to symbolize the Anglophone hope.⁴

All the issues and themes raised in his plays reveal that only a committed artist, a humanist, would be that concerned with the lot of suffering men and women, a suffering inflicted on them, tragically enough, by their own cruel kind with the collaboration of unfeeling neo-colonial masters. Yet Bate Besong is not misty-eyed in believing that he has a magic wand to solve, instantly, the problems of his suffering people. He himself acknowledges the limitation of the committed writers.

True, the power of the writer is not always strong

enough to change the political and social situation of his time but his art can become a fighting literature, he can write works which are artistically profound and politically correct: he can write works of indictment and works that show how his world is and could be. (Besong 1993:18)

The committed artist alone may not have the power to bring about immediate political change. But he and the writers of other forms of political literature, a buoyant private press, the appropriate political opinion leaders and parties, can all effect meaningful change. 'The committed artist need not be a wheel alone, but he is an essential spoke in the wheel of socio-political change.' (Ambanasom 1996:225) And that is where we place Bate Besong, Victor Epie Ngome, Bole Butake and Nkengasong.

Requiem for the Last Kaiser is socialist in conception but modernist in technique (Matumamboh 1988:iii). The desire to experiment, to look for more effective dramatic techniques, is still there. But greater emphasis is now on a more effective communication with the audience. Gone are the songs that were a feature in the two earlier plays. Then, they had served as thematic reinforcement, but now Bate Besong does not need them since he has incorporated his issues into clear statements and dialogues.

The flashback technique is back again, but it is far from the bewildering and complicated time-shifts of the first play. The one here is more effective in that it throws more light on the characters of Abossollo, Atangana and Woman. There is parody for satirical effect. And the device of a play within the play makes for multiple role-plays, allowing the author to use certain actors to achieve comic and satirical effects otherwise impossible with the real actors without greatly modifying the context.

Thus we have Akonchong and Gambari, the unemployed academics, role-playing head-porters; but at other times they are Akhikirikirii and the Ambassador. Still there are times when Akonchong is condemning 'Akonchong', his alter ego. The only difficulty likely to arise from such multiple roles is that if members of the audience are less wary to know exactly when a character is playing his central role and when he takes on someone else's, or is parodying somebody, the play will be confusing to them. Equally

effective is the technique of using voices, rather than the physical presence of the speakers. Voices can, from off stage, threaten Akhikrikrikii in language that would be impossible if the speakers were physically near the tyrant.

Now with *Change Waka & His Man Sama Boy* (2001),⁵ to be simply referred to hereafter as *Change Waka*, we are once more confronted with a play influenced by the techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd. Gone are the traces of plot and conflict noted in the last two plays treated above. We are back to the plotlessness of the first play and exposed to a number of new dramatic techniques that may leave a new comer to this drama initially confounded as to what is going on in it, or what some of its actions represent. There is no sense of action moving, say, from point X to Y with cause and effect. The actions of many characters are apparently unmotivated; there is a constant movement of characters to and fro, with some of their utterances not making sense to the reader/spectator. At times when the reader feels that a character is saying something reasonable the latter soon starts sounding strange with disjointed declarations as if there is a screw loose in his faculties.

But the reader who feels that the fictive world Bate Besong's imagination conjures up here seems a chaotic one, senseless and absurd is right; that is just what the author, through a careful selection of new dramatic techniques, is out to show: the absurdity of the human condition, the stark electoral realities under a dictator who intends to stretch himself into eternity. In this play Bate Besong demonstrates his mastery of the techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd and the language of stage imagery.

We gather from stage direction that some of the characters are in a trance, somnambulant dream or subjected to hallucinations, all of which subconscious conditions relate to what is known as surrealism, the expression of what is in the subconscious mind. In their speeches some of the characters yoke together a number of unrelated images, fantastic and incongruous combinations that could have occurred to them only in a dream. There is as such no conscious control on their dramatic or poetic material. Consequently, as it often happens in a dream, there is bound to be lack of logic or reason in some aspects of the utterances that take on the character of mad declarations, bringing about Besong's characteristic obscurantism.

The language of stage imagery deployed by the playwright is embodied in symbols, metaphors, and personification. One can cite, among significant symbols, a stuffed or sealed ballot box contrasted with a transparent ballot box, a big brown 'gombo' envelope, the act of dropping a white ballot paper into a transparent ballot box by Change Waka, the proliferation and distribution of Mfawbahep Gknochor Gknochor's portraits, some grotesquely blown out of proportion and even larger than life and placed in virtually every public and private building, and the blowing up of part of the Ministry of Elections, that monument of corruption and rottenness.

In this play Bate Besong has reached a new height in the handling of dramatic language in the sense that despite what we have acknowledged as occasional comprehension difficulty deriving from the author's use of baffling dramatic techniques, some of the utterances of his characters have crystallized into quotable proverbial expressions: 'We turn many sweet dreams into nightmares' (61). 'The word «election» may call to mind a hunter setting a camouflaged device to catch unsuspecting prey' (18); 'The jackal does not hunt the buffalo' (57-58); 'You have traded in sand, expect to be paid in pebbles' (62) etc. the fate that awaits the transparent ballot box in the corrupt Epeng Ebho society is effectively transmitted by the following imagery: 'The flow of oxygen – rich blood to the brain is cut off and the transparent box dies of electoral asphyxia or cerebral anaemia' (8-9); and the sudden death or even non-existence of an electoral code in the Epeng Ebho society is vividly brought out in this personification: '... here you are suggesting that the electoral code might have had a massive cardiac arrest' (48). For the sake of conciseness we will not explore Besong's rich dramatic technique in this play; however, suffice it to cite, among other devices, the use of rich suggestive names, songs by the Mmoninkim dancers and their role in the play, Change Waka's miraculous crystal ball, simple clowning, and the neo-logism 'Omenology' etc.

With regard to the use of suggestive names, 'Mfawbahep' in the playwright's native Kenyang language means a gang leader. This, together with the fact that His Excellency Gknochor Gknochor is referred to in the play as 'loot-dispenser' (23, 37, 43), makes the head of state a great thief, expanding thus the thematic interpretation of the play. 'Change Waka', on the other hand, is a pidgin expression

which roughly means walking differently, or one who walks differently. No wonder in the play the person who bears the name ‘Change Waka’ is a kind of democratic watch-dog, a defender of the transparent ballot box at a time when the dominant and fashionable ‘walking style’ is rigging. Change Waka therefore represents the trend of democratic salvation that is yet to gather steam.

It has already been said that in some ways *Change Waka* presents a particular comprehension difficulty to readers; however, there are hints here and there, disconnected clues that the conscientious reader can piece together in order to come up with a reasonable picture presented by the play, what the various actions and stage images represent, or the general thrust of the play.

The play’s basic subject matter is political elections in the Epend Ebho society, a country ruled by His Imperial Excellency, Mfawbahep Gknochor Gknochor. A whole ministry is devoted to elections: The Ministry of Elections, otherwise known as Ministry of Sorrow. But the manner in which elections are handled leaves much to be desired. The administrative set-up of Epeng Ebho, from the Kangaroo Judge of State through the regional governors, to the *préfets* and down to the compliant *sous-préfets*, the whole system knows but one language: Rigging. The image that recurs time and again is the rottenness of the electoral system. According to Atemengeng,

It does not matter what you do or do not do, you are bound to be ill with the cholera of ballot boxes. The air was thick with swarms of flies. The stench... We are bound to live with corruption (54).

What comes repeatedly is sealed or stuffed ballot boxes. We see a fat brown ‘gombo’ envelope and a sealed ballot box, synonym, in the Cameroonian parlance, for bribery and corruption, being passed on to *sous-préfets* and the Judge of the Supreme Court by His Imperial Excellency himself (61-2).

Indeed it is institutionalized electoral corruption that the drama is concerned with since this affects the whole administrative

system of Epeng Ebho. His Imperial Excellency can count on it for his continual, unperturbed rule since the opposition who may press for electoral transparency is no match for the strong man with the whole system in his hand. In the frightful image of the tyrant, 'One political party is forced to batter out the brains of another with a heavy hammer' (61). If this imagery does not convey enough the ruthlessness of Gknochor Gknochor towards his political adversary at election time, this other one may just approach it: 'In warfare if you do not have food and your fellow soldier is wounded, you may as well kill him to survive' (59).

The edifice of the Ministry of Elections is thus a gigantic fraud, dominated by demonic powers and occultic forces. Their motto is R.P., Rig and Prosper. There is material prosperity for riggers. But for those who do not belong to the Sawa cult of Rig and Propser, the Ministry of Elections is nothing but a claptrap, a place of deceit, death and sorrow. An image by Change Waka says it all: 'The word «election» may call to mind a hunter setting a camouflaged device to catch unsuspecting prey' (18). The fraudulent electoral system is therefore set up to deceive the people, to bamboozle them, and to take them unawares, and give victory always to the dictator Gknochor Gknochor who intends to rule for as long as it is humanly possible and who will 'only retire after having moulded men and women capable of succeeding me' (57). Epeng Ebho society, with its vile and venal electoral system, is pictured as a mouth with decaying, smelling teeth that bring shame to their owner when he laughs in public. Mister Change Waka says: 'Decaying teeth smell and we feel ashamed when we laugh in public...' (8 and 22).

The object of this electoral chicanery by His Imperial Excellency is therefore to allow him to entrench and perpetuate himself in power, the secret yearning of many an African despot. Anyone who attempts to rival the tyrant runs a risk. The relationship between Gknochor Gknochor and Change Waka is adversarial though not dramatically confrontational until the latter is suspected by the former; for this, Change Waka will pay with his life. Gknochor Gknochor tells him '... You become unbalanced in your thinking, you arrogantly try to usurp certain sesekou ocular functions... We insist on being the last beasts holding their own in Africa ... Kill him... I am responsible...' (62-63). The themes emerging from the

play include robbery, electoral chicanery, a fraudulent electoral system, bribery and corruption, the secret desire to rule forever, and a ruthless dictatorship. But there is also the wish for transparent elections expressed through the symbolic voting act of Change Waka. These themes generally mark out the tone of this play as reactionary, in clear contrast to the progressive spirit of the previous dramas.

As for *Once Upon Great Lepers*⁶ (ts), hereafter to be simply referred to as *Great Lepers*, it is a sequel to *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie* (1986), and resembles the earlier play in subject matter and technique. The familiar leitmotifs of plebiscite, referendum, reunification and national integration are there; radical Anglophones are called secessionists and subversives. Important historical places like Foumban, Mantoum and Tcholliré re-appear. Like *Zombie*, *Great Lepers* consists of two main actors (lepers) but with a significant difference; while in *Zombie* the two central characters are a Francophone and an Anglophone, in the sequel the two main actors are Anglophones, as indicated by their names.

Ntufam Vikuma Egu Eku is surely a name from the Anglophone South-West Region; VIKUMA, in the 1960s and 1970s, was an acronym whose three syllables stood for the coastal people from Victoria (Vi) Kumba (Ku) Mamfe (Ma), today known as SAWA, a much larger designation that includes coastal Francophones. The other three names (Ntufam Egu Eku) can be linked to specific ethnic groups in the South-West Region. On the other hand Samndeng Ngufor Akriyé Moghamo is indubitably from the Anglophone North-West Region, specifically from Momo Division; besides, 'Samndeng' is a corruption of Tandeng Muna, the late veteran politician who died in 2002 at the age of 90.

Identifying both Ntufam Vikuma Egu Eku and Samndeng Ngufor Akriyé Moghamo as Anglophones is important for the interpretation of the play. *Great Lepers* is a subtle criticism of the political leadership of Cameroon, especially as it impacts on the lives of the Anglophone partners in the political union between Anglophones and Francophones. If in the earlier play the relationship between Francophones and Anglophones is likened to that of a master and a servant, or a teacher and a pupil, in the sequel the gap between the two has widened to the detriment of Anglophones.

In *Great Lepers* Commandante Mbokaya the tyrant and Dr. Obenegou the Surgeon General represent Francophone Cameroonians while the two lepers, as we have explained, are Anglophones. The tyrant and his group are 'First Class' citizens while the Lepers (Anglophones) are 'Tenth Class' citizens, with all the socio-economic and political implications. May 20, the Cameroon National Day, is considered by the lepers as a day of the enslavement and imprisonment of the Anglophones, a people who had come into the political union as equals with the Francophones. Addressing the audience Samndeng Ngufor Akriyé Moghamo says 'Mbokaya [Ahidjo] has dominated man to his injury. We came as kings but we are treated as slaves' (20).

It is the former dictator, President Ahmadou Ahidjo, who is often accused of having abrogated the union accord arrived at by both the Anglophones and Francophones in Fouban, which formed the basis of the Federal Republic of Cameroon on October 1, 1961, bringing together the Francophone East Cameroon and the Anglophone West Cameroon. However, following the May 20 1972 referendum organized by President Ahidjo, the Federation was scrapped in favour of the United Republic of Cameroon and May 20 instituted as the Cameroon National Day. In obvious reference to this earlier, the two lepers in a song, 'Once Upon Great Lepers', had said about Commandante Mbokaya that:

He was deceived into thinking that by violating the
oaths of the town of the double-headed snake named
Fouban he could attend god-like insight and power
(23).

The society is pictured as a concentration camp, a prison yard. Occasionally the actors address the audience as 'Brothers and Sisters of Kondangui', in reference to the famous prison in the capital city (10, 43); no wonder the Anglophones in the play regard themselves as 'captives of Referendum and ... inmates of May 20 penitentiary' (33).

In this play the French come in for a severe bash; they are considered harbingers of conflict. According to Ntufam Vikuma Egu Eku: 'Life is more peaceful/if one is not a French man' (44) ... and 'Deep inside us we hate/The French money' (34).

The tyrant Mbokaya is criticized for importing lethal artillery to strengthen his power at the time the lepers could not afford their basic needs (15). Yet the dying dictator appeals to these ‘Tenth Class’ citizens to donate blood for his survival. But the ugly actors refuse and abandon the ‘First Class’ citizen to die in terrible agony. If the earlier play is entitled *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie*, the sequel, *Once Upon Great Lepers*, could appropriately be titled the *Most Cruel Death of the Wicked Commandante Mbokaaya*.

The Banquet (ts)⁷ is a critical, cinematographic review of the colonial and neo-colonial history of Erouncam (Cameroun), ending with a revolution and a gruesome cannibal feast (banquet) in which the Prancefraudian (French) envoy in Nouayed (Yaoundé) is maniacally drinking the blood gushing out of his own compatriot (Notre Seigneur) he has murdered. Here oppressive and exploitative colonialism and neo-colonialism are shown at their worst.

To be able to realize their economic objectives the colonizers set out to completely subdue the colonized subjects. That is why ‘l’ordre régèra’ at all cost in Erouncam, is considered by Notre Seigneur as part and parcel of Prancefraud (France). The amount of brutality committed on the citizens of Erouncam is such that only a great, mass grave can accommodate the large number of people killed. Prancefraudian brutality in Wild Erouncam leads to the escape into Virgin Erooncam (Cameroon-English rendition) by some citizens of Erouncam.

The first Premier⁸ of Virgin Erooncam raises, thanks to the flashback technique, the prophetic argument put forward, during the historic plebiscite campaign, against union with the Wild Erouncam. Here the disadvantages of union with Wild Erouncam are pointed out while the relative benefits of union with Reginia (Nigeria) are highlighted. However, to Fon Achirimbi of Bafut none of the plebiscite alternatives is acceptable; choosing between Reginia and Wild Erouncam is like electing to fall either into the deep sea or into wild fire.

Under President Mbozo’o Erouncam is a neo-colonial state ruled from Prancefraud. An ideal neo-colonial stooge, Mbozo’o cannot sign any important act without the approval of his neo-colonial overlord: ‘There is no decree I’ll sign/Without Notre Seigneur’s approval’ (36). According to Notre Seigneur, Killeran, the economy

of Prancefraud in the 21st century will consist of economic resources of both Wild Erooncam and Virgin Erooncam, 'or else there will be no Imperial Prancefraud' (31). That is why there is the reckless exploitation by multinational companies of the forests of the country, the cocoa farmers' profits, and the nation's petroleum.

Contradictions within neo-colonialism stir up angry reactions to it on the part of the subjected people who seek ways to break the vicious cycle and improve their lot. Hence the emergence of revolutionary forces consisting mostly of the Wakenmbeng Collective, Erooncam Belle, and other progressive elements who make up the movement for democracy. The latter originate from Erooncam and then move to Erooncam. They are brutalized by the forces of law and order with the aid of such traditional instruments of torture as water-cannon, teargas, police dogs, live bullets, etc (48). However, the revolutionaries' impact on the population and the economy is palpable. The Prancefraudian economy begins to suffer from the blows of the struggle for democratization in Erooncam; Erooncamnaians boycott Prancefraudian goods in the country (48).

Revolutionaries 'from across the Wall' (the Mungo) take Nouayed by storm; their voices are heard condemning the neo-colonial malpractice in the country, with the greatest attack reserved for the Prancefraudians and their stooges.

- Male Voice: The way of peace is to cultivate
 JUSTICE!
- Another: Death to the colons murdering our
 women and children!
- Female Voice: Death to the colonial vulture
 wrecking our forest reserves!
- Voice of Belle: Away with Messiahs of truth from
 above and tyrants at the helm; away
 with irredeemable blunderers who
 feed fat from the oyster of the
 national economy; we denounce
 those forces of mammon who derail
 us from the search of self-
 affirmation... Mandelas build

bridges to all sections of society ...
ours are testaments of iniquitous
brutality (43-45).

To the greatest shock of the Prancefraudian Envoy in Nouayed President Mbozo'o, in a spectacular *volte face*, embraces the argument of the revolutionaries and dumps the tricolor into the waste-paper basket!.

Envoy: (*sobbing*) And you are doing all this to mother
Prancefraud? (*his face is haggard, his eyes are
bloodshot and burning*) I shall shoot myself.
Mbozo'o: Prancefraud should be paying our debts for
what she has stolen and is still stealing (46).

Like Mbozo'o the following neo-colonial agents have since joined the bandwagon of the revolutionaries: Gilboa Agulaba Amberetu (Officer) and the grave-diggers of the system: Akoko Ambilichu, Arreykaka Tambong and Um Ignace.

In addition to the national issues raised in this play, there is the strictly regional appeal made to Erooncamnaian elements of Virgin Erooncam (Anglophones) on page 30 and also in the Epilogue by the Belle, to step up their opposition to and struggle against Prancefraud and all its lackeys in Erooncam, to unite in their common cause and assert their rights. In this struggle they must continue the legacy of the Wakenmbeng Collective if they are worthy offspring of these elderly women. Erooncamnaians thus constitute a veritable obstacle to Prancefraud in the country. In *The Banquet*, as in some of Bole Butake's plays, women are a great positive force for change; after all, the Wakenmbeng, the Female Voice, and the Belle constitute the nucleus of the revolutionary forces.

As a pageant the play is a celebration of a particular period in the history of Cameroon (colonial and neo-colonial experiences). Among the devices of technique deployed in this play we have the use of camera shots, flashback, mime, parody, trance, hallucination, voices of certain people, the ringing of the bell, satirical songs, prologue and epilogue. There is also the technique of name-alteration in which some places and personalities are known by new names,

formed through scrabbled letters of the original names: Ubae for Buea, Nouayed for Yaoundé, Adoula for Douala, Erooncam for Anglophone Cameroon, Erouncam for Francophone Cameroun; or through the rhythm of their names certain words resemble their originals: Killeran for Mitterand, Varis for Paris, Vrench for French, Yzhirag for Jacques Chirac, Reginia for Nigeria; or a completely new word is coined to symbolize another e.g. Prancefraud for France.

Some features of this play make necessary the following comment. By his action and his own admission H.E. Mbozo'o is a neo-colonial lackey who can do nothing significant without the prior approval of his neo-colonial master, Notre Seigneur of Prancefraud. Therefore, his sudden *Volte face* to dump Prancefraud and to jump on the bandwagon of the revolutionaries without visible persuasion from the latter, rather surprises than convinces the audience/reader. There is not sufficient motivation to justify his behaviour.

In *The Banquet* Wild Erouncam and Virgin Erooncam, as intimated above, stand respectively for Francophone Cameroun and Anglophone Cameroon. The adjectives 'wild' and 'virgin' are value-laden words with different connotations. 'Wild' connotes brutality, savagery, and barbarism, which uncivilized comportment, in the Anglophone consciousness, was associated with the uncouth behaviour, in the early 1960s especially, of Francophone forces of law and order, particularly the gendarmes.

But while this is true of the general way in which the Anglophones perceived the Francophones, it would be less accurate to assume that all Anglophones, and much less Francophones, perceived Anglophones, in the psychological sense, at least, as virgins or angels, innocent, pure, unspoilt.

In fact the Francophones, according to Edward O. Ako (2001:24), looked at the 'Anglos' rather as 'undisciplined, uncouth'. It might, therefore, be simplistic to conclude that 'Wild Erouncam' definitely stands for the devil, while 'Virgin Erooncam' represents the Angel. Thus the issue of 'wild' (wanton) and 'virgin' is rather one of perception and self-perception, or perception from different perspectives.

On the whole the six plays by Bate Besong examined here constitute a study in political dictatorship, brutality and economic mismanagement. Though inspired by local socio-political and

economic situations the dramas have relevance at both the national and continental levels; so long as Africa continues to produce greedy, corrupt and power-hungry dictators, the topicality of Besong's plays will remain high. The playwright is intrigued by the fact that Africa appears to be cursed as she is saddled with political leaders who, once in power, will do everything within that power to remain forever in power.

Like any good satirist Bate Besong is ridiculing and flagellating those in authority with the moral intention of making them change their bad habits for the better. His severe criticism of public officers is but an indirect advocacy of good governance, of economic and political transparency in the management of public affairs. Bate Besong's social vision then begins to crystallize. His ideal society would be one marked by moral decency, and rid of economic and political abuse, a society where there is social justice and fairness in the distribution of the wealth of the nation, not one in which this sharing is skewed in favour of the rich and the powerful, society devoid of electoral chicanery, gerrymander, corruption and the violation of the human rights of defenceless citizens. Ultimately, by implication, Bate Besong is advocating authentic rigour and moralization in the conduct of 'la chose publique'.

Bate Besong is well-known in literary circles for his difficult and controversial style essentially because his 'linguistic inflations can make reading difficult'. While this linguistic obstacle is particularly true for his poetry and some of his polemical essays, it is only generally so for his dramas. Bate Besong knows just too well that a committed playwright cannot afford to be too opaque for his audience made up, for the most part, of the common people.

Although it is more difficult to detect an artist's tone of voice in a play than in some novels and, certainly, in essays, Bate Besong's essentially abrasive mood comes across to us through some of his characters. This style reveals him as one who can at times be blunt, direct, fearless, shocking, aggressive and even violent. Bate Besong's linguistic arsenal shows that his is a combative style; what Gilbert Doho (1993:98) calls 'ce style de guerre.' And all this reveals both the intrepidity and the anger of a man against the perceived oppressors of deprived Cameroonians in general and frustrated Anglophones in particular. Some would justify the use of such

vitriolic language as found in Bate Besong's works on the grounds that Besong's satirical butts or political targets have become so impervious to criticisms that only sharp verbal grenades and missiles fired by such a literary guerrilla can effectively jolt them out of their false complacency. And J.S. Biatcha's angry reaction referred to earlier is a testimony of how effective this style of writing can sometimes be.

As we have seen, in all his six dramas, in the interest of effective dramatic communication, Bate Besong leaves no stone unturned, for no artistic device is above being brought into dramatic service. However, given the modernist mode of discourse that informs his creative work, Besong's plays still suffer from general obscurantism. Realism is not his greatest strength; for in his dramaturgy he can resort to the comical, the tragic, the fantastic, the nonsensical and, above all, shock for special effects. The shocking effect is to startle the audience to re-examine, in a new light, their socio-political situation. The two central characters in the first play, for instance, are disgusting lepers; in the second drama some of the characters are carriers of shit who shock the audience by turning on to them and exposing their naked buttocks to foul up the air. At the opening of the third play, the main character addresses the audience from a coffin which opens and closes:

Are you there?... The people understand me, very well. I also understand them. We know what we want (*pause*). At the Great Gathering, I'll mesmerize them: Soweto, Falling Cocoa prices in the World Market, that stone country of Butcher dog Botha. By decree number one million and ninety-ten ... ninety-ten (*pause*). I'll get them where I want. (*a spitting noise*). Take these journalists off and torture them. I am the Consciousness, the Tempo and Heart-Throb of Iduote. The He-Alone and Guide. (*Short pause*). I am the One-Man-Band... I am the Universal Pedagogue and Pointing-Rod. I'm in all places at the same time. (*to an imaginary group*). Je vous ai compris. I'll tax them for the air I provide ... (*short pause*). In this total coming, I will be the Alpha and Omega, the last and only pharaoh in Paradise. The history of the historicity of Agidigidi. (*with a stage*

whisper). Tax them for the air I provide... and they know that I can be tough... By decree number one million and ninety-ten...yes... one million and ninety-ten (*with a hoarse whisper*). I'll be in politics till I die... I give small *bouai* power... one small *bouai* power... *Shege dan banzaar*... I go come dey) *a long pause*) Amot, Ma-a ding Sonara money... Oweh, money mbeng. Wa ding money? Bebele zamba'al.

In this single speech the voice from the coffin has made use of at least five languages: English, French, Pidgin, Ewondo and Hausa.

Part of Besong's claim to fame as a playwright resides in the fact that he is also a poet not only with an incredible vocabulary power, but also with a rare ability to use words to create powerful images and symbols with poetic significance. There is a dominant poetic image traceable in each of his plays and accentuating the character of the society we find in them. In *Zombie* the image is that of a society groaning under the weight of a torturing machine; in *Beasts* that of a society which is a huge public lavatory; in *Requiem* that of a community viewed as a large mouth full of foul and rotten teeth; in *Change Waka* that of a country pictured as a mouth with decaying, smelling teeth that bring shame to their owner when he laughs in public; in *Great Lepers* that of a country depicted as a concentration camp, a prison yard; and in *The Banquet* that of a society pictured as a huge, mass grave.

When all has been said and done, the bringing of Marxist insight into the conception of *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* allows Bate Besong to view his issues more clearly than he does in his first play; it enables him to highlight vividly the fundamental struggle in today's neo-colonial Africa: the confrontation between two opposing aesthetics, namely, the aesthetic of oppression and exploitation led by local capitalists and their foreign allies, on the one hand, and the aesthetic of struggle and liberation, commanded by the progressive forces made up of peasants, workers, etc., on the other. The play ends with the forces embracing the reformist aesthetic having an edge over those espousing the repressive one, an optimistic conclusion indeed.

However, this play is viewed by Peter Abety (1996:258) as one leaning more heavily on the side of the message than on the medium, which is not surprising though. For, as we have stated above, *Requiem* is socialist in ideological orientation, and it is in the nature of genuine socialist-oriented works of art to accentuate their message without ignoring their technique. But we have equally indicated that, like all Besong's plays, *Requiem* is modernist in technique. Were the play mere 'cheap political propaganda' (Abety: *Ibid*), it would not have won for its author the prestigious 1992 ANA⁹ Literature (Drama) Prize in a country as creatively and intellectually competitive as Nigeria. It would be strange, indeed, if the award was based solely on the play's political content without regard to its dramatic technique.

Notes

1. Bate Besong, *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie* (Limbe?) Nooremac Press 1986. Page references to the play are taken from this edition.
2. Bate Besong, *Beasts of No Nation*, Limbe: Nooremac Press 1990. Page references to this play are taken from this edition.
3. Bate Besong, *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*. Limbe: Presbook, 1998. Page references to the play are taken from this edition.
4. See the sub-title of George Ngwane's book: i.e. 'The Symbol of Anglophone Hope'.
5. Bate Besong, *Change Waka & His Man Sawa Boy*. Yaoundé Editions CLE, 2001. Page references to the play are taken from this edition.
6. Bate Besong, *Once Upon Great Lepers* (ts). Page references to the play are taken from this typed script (ts).
7. Bate Besong, *The Banquet* (ts). Page references to the play are taken from this typed script (ts).
8. This was Dr E.M.L. Endeley.
9. ANA stands for the Association of Nigerian Authors.

Chapter Five

N. John Nkengasong – Waiting for a Saviour

In the previous chapter we attempted to define the concept of Theatre of the Absurd within which John Nkengasong's play *Black Caps and Red Feathers*¹ is written. *Black Caps and Red Feathers*, to be subsequently referred to simply as *Black Caps*, is a remarkable two-act play that constitutes the author's individual insight into the human condition. It comprises only two characters, namely Creature and Lunatic. Since Creature is himself a madman we can safely say that the play consists of two lunatics as characters. As it opens most of 'what' it is about, especially in Act One, has already taken place as we gather from the testimony of the main character, Creature. In Act One Creature is the sole actor, as every declaration proceeds from his mouth.

He is sitting near a large rubbish heap with a big, long bone in his hand and speaking his thoughts aloud in the manner of a madman talking alone. In the course of his utterances he enacts other roles, quotes other characters and holds one-sided conversations. He reveals facts relating to his obsessions, fears and predicament, and describes blood-curdling actions and horrifying deeds of which he is victim. We gather from his lyrical, poetic statements that he is a political prisoner under the dictatorship of Traourou, and persecuted because he has refused to recant his statement of truth. Up to the end of Act One, then, the play is a monodrama, a one-man show.

In Act Two, thanks to the conversation between him and the Voice of the invisible ghost of Traourou, we learn that Creature who has been badgering Traourou's ghost with questions about his freedom, had indeed been physically released from the underground prison after he finally cracked up. And since in his insanity he could neither differentiate his left from his right, nor the day from the night, he was harmless and of no use to anyone. Hence his release, a liberation meaningless to him now. Thus from the practical point of view, Creature has been freed from the underground prison, but psychologically speaking, he is still immured there. At the beginning of the play we see and hear him yearning to be freed; at the end of

the play we see and hear him in his final words still harping on his desire to be freed: 'Traourou... Traourou ... Free me... Fre-e-e me-ee...' (50).

The play ends with Creature swooning, followed shortly by 'sustained blasts of thunder' (51), a rich symbol indeed. For thunder is a sudden, violent and frightening sound which may symbolize here a sudden, unexpected event full of revolutionary implications. It may also herald the coming of rain, a cleansing symbol to wash away the atrocities and impurities of the clan under the reign of 'bastardom,' the legacy of illegitimacy instituted by Traourou, a condition *sine qua non* for the eventual emergence of the saviour of the clan, 'some clansman whose black cap and red feather is linked with the umbilical cord of the gods and ancestors of the clan... must lead the clan to a sacrifice of pacification and expiation' (49) so that, as Lunatic puts it, 'we might be safe again' (52).

Consequently, a major theme emerging from the play could be that of waiting for a saviour, not only a saviour of the clan as a whole, but the saviour of Creature as a person, an individual. The latter has been waiting and endlessly beseeching Traourou to send his 'berets' to free him from jail. Even as Creature ends his part in the play, he has not yet given up hope. It matters little that he is psychopathic. Other themes may include: imprisoned man waiting for freedom, man in chain forever, man's inhumanity to man, a need for a patriot to save the clan, etc. More themes will be pointed out later.

Now the harsh, cruel and inhuman prison conditions so poignantly described by Creature; the blood-curdling underground cell torture inflicted on him, so movingly and poetically depicted – all of these – represent Nkengasong's personal intuition of the stark realities of the human condition as they really are under a dictatorial regime. The play is an externalization of the author's fears, nightmares, and fantasies, a successful attempt to depict reality as apprehended by him, and his own individual sense of being, which reveals his vision of the world as essentially tragic.

Since practitioners of the Theatre of the Absurd are rebels against the dramatic techniques employed by writers of the realistic theatre, and since we have placed Nkengasong's work squarely within that new dramatic convention, we will discover a great deal in *Black*

Caps that is different from what one would normally expect in a traditional play. Therefore, to make sense of this play, the standards used in evaluating it should not be criteria pertinent to traditional drama, but rather those belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd.

As we open this play we should shelve, for a moment, our notion of objectively valid characters, well-delineated, pitted one against another in stormy conflicts. If we briefly remind ourselves of what we said in Chapter Two concerning Victor Epie Ngome's traditional drama – *What God Has Put Asunder*, we will better see what type of play *Black Caps* is and how far we have moved away from traditional drama. For if in Ngome's play there is a well-told story, there is none in Nkengasong's where we have only the poetic utterances of a madman, in the manner of stream of consciousness; if Ngome's is a well-constructed play in five acts, with the story rising to a climax in Act III before tapering off from Act IV, and ending in Act V, we have here a two-act play with a circular structure – the play ending where it began, with Creature still screaming to be released from prison; if in Ngome's play there are clearly developed themes and issues emerging from subtly debated approaches to life styles, in Nkengasong's there are none clearly argued out in discursive language and from different perspectives. True, themes and ideas there are in Nkengasong's play, but they are explored and developed in a manner peculiar to poetry – through images, symbol, suggestiveness, association and implications, etc. If in Ngome's play there are fairly developed and complex characters, there are none in Nkengasong's play that grow or change; if in Ngome's play there is a high dialogue value revealing sharp and lively exchanges, Nkengasong's play has but two characters who do not even engage each other in a dialogue, in any dramatic way. Most of the play is a dramatic monologue full of poetic utterances by Creature. Therefore, *Black Caps* is not dramatic in the accepted sense of the word.

Lunatic, the other character beside Creature is a type of chorus-character who plays the role which, in traditional drama, is reserved for the Prologue, Epilogue and inter-act commentary. In this play Lunatic appears before Act One opens. His appearances invariably have to do with Creature whom he introduces, commenting on his role, foreshadowing what he will come to do.

As we said above, *Black Caps* possesses nothing resembling

what we would call a plot. For there is no sequence of events that link up to tell a story; no narration of events with cause and effect, about the adventures of characters, moving inexorably to a conclusion of a sort. It is a drama of situation rather than one of a sequence of events. Its focus is on the human situation of Creature as he is caught in his plight within the inescapable imprisonment under the dictator Traourou. It is the situation of a human being reduced to the low status of an animal, but who remains stoical as he stands firm by the truth he believes in, though the earth itself may threaten to collapse on him.

The setting itself in its unforgettable imagery emphasizes this animal picture of a man compelled to depend on a heap of rubbish for food. There is a huge dump, near it a tripod of stones on which is a can serving as a pot; there is a bundle stuffed with all sorts of odd things, and a bone in Creature's hand. All of these are the paraphernalia of a lunatic, including the rubbish heap near which he is sitting and which he appropriates to himself. The play is dominated by this powerful image of a man forced to forage for food from the rubbish heap. There is a sub-pattern of images and symbols enriching the interpretation of this lyrical drama. Right from the setting, then, Creature is seen not just as a contemptible person but, worse still, as an animal. The word 'Creature', which is his name, is, by initial definition, an animal. This is a far cry from the setting of some Shakespearean tragedies or histories, for instance, where we are introduced, from the setting, to the glory, gorgeousness and glamour connected with royalty.

The language of *Black Caps* is one based mostly on a pattern of concrete poetic images. With regard to the play's poetic dimension proper, we have operating here what I would like to call, the law of compensation. That is to say, with regard to the absence of subtle characterization and plot sophistication, what Nkengasong has technically left undone has been adequately compensated for in poetic amplitude and concentration, for the whole play, particularly Act One, is a powerful lyrical poem full of images.

Most of these images are embodied in the utterances made by Creature, incantatory vocalizations that are actually his thoughts spoken aloud since he is a madman; lyrical utterances rendered in basic rhythms of everyday speech:

Hoi! Who can see a man's head severed from the trunk and tell the clan that it was a lie? That was Ganje gone. That was the pride of the clan gone. The hope of the clan gone. Mocked on the bottom of a river by crocodiles. His head taken to the Alps for Norman meat. Skull for Norman castles (*Pauses. Groans and toddles about the heap. Stops.*) Can one carry a plaque in the bottom of a single mind? Can one hide a plaque from the clan? Can one say that the gods of the clan are not slighted? I could not carry a plaque in my belly alone. I called the people and told the truth. Told the truth! And asked for a solemn funeral for Ganje. Me. I asked for a king's funeral for Ganje. The clan mourned eight days and eight nights. The gods wept eight seasons. And their tears rose from the earth. There was a flood for one whole season. Until the people dug a grave. A king's grave, and buried Ganje's coffin. Ganje married to a rock on the bottom of the river. Ganje mocked on the bottom of the river by crocodiles (11).

Here is an arresting image of Creature as a prisoner in an underground jail in a tight hole with both hands and feet chained, with pepper in his eyes and on his phallus, with water in the cell: water on the floor and water from the ceiling, with electric current plugged in his arse, and the very Creature 'grabbed' by the throat and 'dragged' from one tight hole to another! It is a frightening and unforgettable portrayal of prison experiences in an inferno during the First Republic under President Ahmadou Ahidjo. This is how Creature paints the gruesome picture himself.

They took me to another hole underground. Added pepper to my thing. To my eyes. And current in my arse. But I was resolute. I told no lie that Ganje was not dead. I spoke the truth. Nothing but the truth. The other day they dragged me to yet another hole. Water on the floor. Pepper burning out my eyes and I only heard them lock behind me. 'You shall make up your mind by tomorrow!' said the guttural throat. The water, ankle deep. You cannot lie on the floor. In water. Pepper burning out my eyes. Drips of cold water came dripping

on my head. I could not wash my eyes, with cuffs on my legs, on my wrists. I was dying. Worse death than Ganje! Oh Ganje! Ganje! I'd rather be mocked by crocodiles at the bottom of a lake than endure eternal hell in the underground. But worse was still to come. The water on the floor changed its mind. Current. Electric current in it. I struggled here. Struggled there in a tight hole blind with pepper in my eyes. So it went. I wailed. I cried. No one was anywhere. Was this the right way to die? But I was dying. I could quicken their job, stab or hang myself. But oh! The cuffs on my feet and hands (13).

Can there be a worse picture of humiliation than this? Can anything beat this stark reality of the human condition? One is truly frightened by the kinds of concrete images conjured by Nkengasong's poetic imagination. Under such a condition quick and simple death would be preferable, and Creature would rather have opted for suicide than to endure a life of such unfathomable anguish. Unfortunately for him there are cuffs on his hands and feet.

After starving this anti-hero for six days, on the seventh day the torturers bring him what appears to be food and drink. But this turns out to be a more dehumanizing torment and degradation; for the bundle of food is nothing but

Old shit when I loosened it. King Traourou's shit that had been left to bake in the sun for days. The mimbo, mmff! Mmff! It was the smell of a madman's urine. A madman called Traourou whose piss was left for days to ferment ... Chained my hands again, quick, quick and forced the shit into my mouth. Washed it down into my belly with the piss. You must eat the King's entrails on his birthday, they said. The elements in me revolted. But the muscles of my belly were too weak to resist ... Too weak to vomit out the madness of King Traourou. They hit my head and mouth with the butts of rifles till my jaws were spongy with bleeding. They blocked the door of the hole and my next visitor was the rising water on the floor, electric current in it ... (26-27)

Black Caps and Red Feathers, the title of the play, symbolizes, especially in the grassland areas of Cameroon, authority, and power; for to wear a black cap and a red feather is to have been traditionally knighted, to have been honoured with a title and raised to nobility. It is this power that Traourou wields virtually single-handed, and jealously. He would go to any length to eliminate any citizen he perceives as a threat to his power. The dictator even goes after people, like Oumi, whom he has only dreamed about of aspiring to his black cap and red feather, a selfish desire on the part of the autocrat to remain forever in power.

This is Nkengasong's indictment of such rulers. The author would seem to be saying that under such a power-hungry dictator, a critic, a votary of truth or an ideological adversary stands no chance of escape from the tyrant's instruments of torture. Like Creature such a critic faces either death, insanity, or the agony of eternal incarceration. This, in a way, is the message aptly conveyed by the image on the front cover of the play. Another major theme emerging from the work, then, is the consummate quest for power by a dictator; he attains a position of power and intends to keep it forever.

In the contemporary consciousness of the average Cameroonian within the context of Anglophone and Francophone relationship, the Great River mentioned in the play is an allusion to the Mungo River that separates Anglophones from the Francophones, the line of demarcation between the two linguistic communities. So when Creature, an Anglophone, in a conversation with the ghosts of his linguistic brothers, accuses them of being butchers, traitors and sellouts, or when one of the ghosts confesses to having 'sold my people and changed the course of the Great River' (34), this would be what Anglophone Cameroonians would consider a great act of betrayal by some Anglophone political elite.

And what does the confessing ghost have as reward for betraying his people? 'They put me in a latrine to wash and kill cockroaches' (34), a base job, indeed, and one reflecting his marginalized status and that of his community, reminiscent of Bate Besong's carriers of shit in *Beasts of No Nation*.

It is important to note that while Traourou represents President Ahidjo, Creature, as already said, is an Anglophone. The latter's obsession with freedom from Traourou's prison may also translate

into Anglophone yearning for something more fundamentally meaningful and satisfying within the clan (Cameroon), a collective quest for identity, perhaps, comparable to that of the Night-soil men in Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation*.

By the same token the name Bobe Khom, considered in the play as a patriot, is an allusion to Bobe Ngome Jua, an Anglophone political elite and former Premier of West Cameroon who symbolized, while he was alive, the hope of Anglophones²; for he dared to stand his ground against the formidable Francophone Ahidjo, the head of state. Of Jua's audacity towards Ahidjo, this is what Hon Willy Ndep Orock Effiom, Grand Chancellor of National Orders and Former Speaker of the West Cameroon House of Assembly, says: 'Ahidjo never liked Jua for his mercurial and confrontational attitude towards him' (Waindim 1997:23).

Names like Ganje (Ouandie), Womba (Wambo Le Courant) Oumi (Felix Roland Moumie), Tum Yoye (Um Nyobe), and Bobe Khom (Bobe Ngom Jua), all of which at one time in Cameroon history were a taboo subject, represent national and regional heroes, killed in defence of truth, on the side of a nationalist cause or the other. Bate Besong cites these very names in his first play. Most of them were involved in the struggle for Cameroon independence. The struggle led by the radical political party, the Union des Populations du Cameroun, (U.P.C), took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The play advocates the rehabilitation of these patriots.

We need not belabour the symbolism of thunder already treated above, but one symbol remains to be looked at – 'Alps'. The Alps objectively is the most famous range of mountains in Western Europe. But in the play 'Alps' symbolizes neo-colonial powers from Europe, particularly France. It is significant that some areas of the Alps are eternally snow-capped, bespeaking their frigidity. And this frigid nature of the neo-colonial masters is exemplified in their betrayal of their own stooge and lackey, Traourou, after they have used him:

Voice ... Those cunning fellows in the Alps! They took away my life when it was sweetest. When I was at the helm of power. Ah, those sniffing devils in the Alps! They showed me paradise and took it away again. (43)

There is a beautiful neologism that Nkengasong employs: the coinage ‘bastardom’, from the word ‘bastard’. In the context of *Black Caps*, ‘bastardom’ means a legacy of illegitimacy, instituted right from the First Republic, a queer historical coincidence with which the clan has since been sadly saddled; for under the reign of ‘bastardom’ the clan can be so thoughtlessly, and with great levity, mortgaged by the ‘bastard’ ‘for fine red Alpine wine’ (41).

It is this destructive ‘bastardom’ that has brought in the ill-luck, the cause of the cataclysm looming large over the clan. For with ‘bastardom’ enthroned, with no sense of blood relation to check its excesses, with the general confiscation of what belongs to the people, and with truth strangled in favour of falsehood, illegitimacy holds sway, and ‘bastardom’ rains misery on the clan. For truth to reign supreme, and for order to emerge, the gods and ancestors must be pacified; and the procession for appeasement must be led by a legitimate son of the native soil who will wail at the ancestral graces so that the gods and ancestors may listen and ‘we might be safe again’, an act of atonement which, nevertheless, may be preceded by some cleansing violence, symbolized by thunder. It is thus clear from the play that the salvation of the clan is contingent upon the elimination of ‘bastardom’ and the institution of truth.

The most ingenious device of technique used by Nkengasong is that of madness which enables him to accomplish effects of stream of consciousness and surrealism otherwise difficult to be realized in drama with sane characters. For the effect of stream of consciousness is best achieved in the novelistic genre. In the novel, for instance, the reader quietly peruses, in his isolated corner, what is supposed to be the private thoughts of the individual as presented to him by the novelist, sometimes allowed by convention to operate to omniscience, knowing what is in others’ hearts and being able to unlock them to expose their contents.

Although some very strange and more baffling things occur in the Theatre of the Absurd, it would be unusual, indeed, to find a normal human being in his right senses shouting out his private thoughts on the stage for the sustained length of time that a play like *Black Caps* lasts. This is acceptable only in a madman such as Nkengasong has created in Creature. Therefore, Creature’s declarations are the totality of the raw consciousness: thoughts,

feelings, ideas, memories, nightmares, fantasies, phantasms, etc, that flow like a stream through his mind. This reflects the basic form of the play – a lyrical flow of a jumble of things. Sometimes Creature's imagination conjures up visions of ghosts or apparitions invisible to the audience, or of a deluge or the apocalyptic end as the world is out of joint threatening to collapse and crush him, things which can happen to one only in a nightmare or otherwise the content of a psychopathic mind:

Hoi! ... Where are these from .. hoi! ... apparitions ... ghosts with fractured skeletons ... rumblings ... the world is cleaving ... hills pounding valleys ... ghosts mad in a weird rite chortle in obsequies ... thousand heads singing anthems roll down the Alps ... rumblings ... seas sneaking into new valleys ... palace walls crumbling, ghettos crumbling. A huge flood ... The flood ... (49).

Another instance of the use of surrealism is where Creature holds a conversation with the voice of the invisible ghost of Traourou (37-47); or when he holds a one-sided conversation, from the perspective of the audience, with his wife Ngwi, or when he apostrophizes her (23-25).

Now no one can pretend that a work like *Black Caps*, or any other work written in the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd, for that matter, is simple. The fact that it is an avant garde work is already a sign of its difficulty, seeing that it is clearly opposed to traditional drama. In other words, the difficulty of the work arises from its form – the utterances of a madman's mind in the manner of the stream of consciousness. And as we all know it is not all that proceeds from a madman's mouth that makes much sense. So if some portions of the play do not seem to make much sense to the audience or reader this is quite in order. It is part of the working of a mad brain. The stream of consciousness does not always make for consistency or coherence. Besides, the play is dealing with an absurd, senseless world, the absurdity of the human condition.

In declarations tenuously held together (20-22), in which power is personified, Creature, in his characteristic poetic imagination, charts the course of Power, with the praises and worries that go with it. But

also in a rare moment of foresight, such as madmen are occasionally endowed with, he prefigures Traourou's eventual discomfiture with his neo-colonial masters and his fall from grace, an event generally confirmed in Act Two by the Ghost's own voice (43).

From the point of view of general artistic evaluation, *Black Caps* is a successful work. However, if it 'is a carefully wrought piece of literature, a notable contribution to the theatre of the absurd', as the blurb says, it nevertheless betrays some flaws. The poetic intensity of Act One lessens in Act Two. Here the desire to state things more factually overrides that of phrasing them more poetically. There is a tendency to recount, in the words of Mbuh Mbuh Tenuu (2001:9) 'the raw material of history rather too closely', with the result that the line between art and history becomes thin indeed. For a madman, Creature is endowed with a surprisingly unrelieved linguistic competence; his utterances, for the most part, are too neat and rather well-articulated. Perhaps a bit more of amnesia in his reasoning could have been more appropriate. But the more evident blemishes are editorial lapses, those little pesky details of grammatical or orthographic nature that could easily have been remedied before the final print-out. But these flaws do not remarkably mar the work which I consider a gem in Cameroon Anglophone Literature.

After everything, then, *Black Caps* is a well-conceived and well-written work, a frightening, unforgettable depiction of torment in an inferno of an underground prison in the clan (Cameroon) under President Ahmadou Ahidjo. Creature, the resolute Apostle of Truth is the victim and Traourou (Ahidjo) the torturer-tyrant who presides over the 'bastardom' he has institutionalized in the clan, a legacy of illegitimacy that has brought only woe and misery to the citizens.

Those who stand for truth or dare to aspire to power are relentlessly pursued and eliminated. The champions of 'bastardom' are in collaboration with neo-colonial masters from the Alps, a skewed relationship that leads to the draining of the clan's resources for the interest of the foreigners and to the detriment of the clan. The promoters of 'bastardom' have confiscated the people's kingship, rights and all, desecrated the shrines of the clan, and virtually mortgaged all the clan's property. Because of this, the gods and ancestors of the clan are angry, and the clan is on the verge of a cataclysm, perhaps a revolutionary cleansing act.

There is an urgent need to save the clan, a desire for a true patriotic person with legitimate power-connection with the ancestors of the clan, to lead the clan in a procession of sacrifice of appeasement. A substantial pacificatory sacrifice has to be made to the gods and ancestors of the clan so that these revered living-dead and forces may put their heads together and save the clan. The inhuman and unpatriotic acts of Traourou and his legacy of 'bastardom' are reprehensible; while recognized is the need to rehabilitate national and regional heroes, people who made the supreme sacrifice in defence of truth and the nationalist cause. The social significance of a work of this nature lies in the fact that it serves as yet one more clarion call, added on to many others, for our leaders and rulers to be chosen from the ranks of genuine patriots and humanists. Exposure of the gruesome nature of prison cells, if perhaps exaggerated, will tell on the consciences of torturers and be a warning that someone might take up the course of the deprived.

From the point of view of literary significance, *Black Caps* reveals Nkengasong as a modernist playwright with a lively imagination. In it we have poetry, nightmare, fantasy and social criticism. It is his personal perception of the human condition, a memorable portrayal of existential hell in an underground prison in the clan, a play written in the strict tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd, and a resonant note that Anglophone Cameroon literature is alive and doing well. With it, Nkengasong joins the company of Bate Besong and Francis Nyamnjoh to swell the ranks of modernist writers of English expression in Cameroon.

Notes

1. N. John Nkengasong, *Black Caps and Red Feathers*. Bamenda: Patron Publishing House, 2001. Page references to this play are taken from this edition.
2. See Bate Besong's poem 'The Grain of Bobe Augustine Ngom Jua' in his selected poems, *Just Above Cameroon*, (1998) 28-29. The poem is a call for Anglophones to keep alive the legacy (the grain) of Bobe Ngom Jua who stood for Anglophone rights.

Conclusion

Occasionally in this work oblique references have been made to Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1983), a revolutionary work that sets out to conscientize an exploited and oppressed people in a Latin American country so that they can stand up for their rights and fight to improve their living condition. In this regard we must confess that the title of our own work, *Education of the Deprived* is, from the point of view of intention, rather a modest one; it may erroneously lead the less wary reader to conclude that it is like Freire's book that sets out directly with the main objective of educating and transforming a people through a revolutionary theory.

But while the titles of both works are allied, their approaches, even if one may point to an eventual and reasonable convergence in their ultimate intention, are different. As an essayist, Paulo Freire directly addresses a target population on certain issues, developing concepts and outlining strategies to carry out certain ideas. In contrast the playwrights of our work, and certainly not us, mere critics and interpreters, are the ones carrying out the main education of the deprived.

However, as artists and, above all, playwrights, they cannot address their target population as Freire does; they do not have a direct voice although they have created voices to carry their ideas. Their approach is therefore indirect and subtle. As artists they are entertainers as well as instructors; for it is a truism that literature pleases while it teaches. And the entertaining, and thus pleasing, part of drama lies in the spectacle, in the lively dialogue, in the quick repartee or spirited and witty exchanges, in the comic aspects, in the moving utterances, in the tension, surprise, suspense and conflict generated that often keep the audience on its toes. The teaching, the instructional and, therefore, the educational dimension of literature (in this case drama), resides in the inspiring lessons drawn from the drama, the moral emerging from it, or the message subtly delivered by the artist. And some of this we have pointed out in the various chapters of our work.

We have arrived at this after a careful analysis of the plays' subject matter and dramatic technique. Generally, the conflict generated is the result of a confrontation between two opposed groups: the privileged versus the underprivileged, the few powerful ones at the top with most comforts of life versus the powerless majority at the bottom deprived of them; the dictatorial, exploitative ruler versus the exploited indigent masses.

Although it is difficult to detect a playwright's tone of voice, and therefore his moral stand, in a play, the way in which the conflict is resolved is a pointer to the author's moral inclination. Some of the plays end on a note of hope for the oppressed ones. The Court's final decision in *What God Has Put Asunder* gives Weka an edge over Garba. Henceforth she just needs to say no for their relationship to be baseless, and for her troubles and tribulations to be put to rest. At the end of *And Palm Wine Will Flow* the cruel and unconscionable Fon dies, putting an end to a tradition and setting up a people's council with no room for dictators or tyrants. Similarly, at the end of *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, Akhikrikikii commits suicide and the progressive forces move into the Marble Palace to take over power.

In all of these cases we notice power about to be passed over to the people for apparently a more just, sane and responsible governance of affairs of state. This dramatic technique shows that the authors have thrown their moral weight, as most serious and decent writers do, on the side of the oppressed. And identifying themselves with the exploited rather than the exploiters means that the playwrights have created characters within the ranks of the deprived to be the vehicles of their ideas. Thus the views, attitudes and critical language of some of the oppressed characters are those of the authors.

In this regard, Weka's critical attitude is something of which Victor Epie Ngome approves. By thus exposing Weka's attitude and ideas to the audience, the playwright, beyond the marriage metaphor, is artistically telling the deprived how to equally behave and fight back for their rights. Similarly, the education given by Woman to the student and the soldiers in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, etc, is equally intended for the benefit of the oppressed, and the uninformed in the audience. By the same token the didactic acts of the women and all the progressive people in *And Palm Wine Will Flow* are also for the educational interest of members of the audience,

many of whom may be victims of political and economic deprivation. The prominent role given women in these plays indicates that for fundamental changes to occur in our society women's active participation is primordial.

We have stated in this work that the Anglophone Problem in Cameroon, as it has emerged in various forms in these plays, is real. It must, however, be stressed here that in none of the plays has the accent been placed on unconditional secession as a solution to the problem. True, the plays have raised issues that prick the conscience of the average Cameroonian in general and the Anglophone Cameroonian in particular. The issues provoke the intelligent Cameroonian to rack his brain and ask some pertinent questions: why are things happening like this? And why to this person and not that one? What solution can we find to this disturbing situation? Can this be an appropriate solution or not?

By and large Anglophones within the larger social context of the plays would prefer a moderate approach to the solution of the problems that pit them against their Francophone brothers, provided that those in power now show a veritable good will to dialogue. Under normal circumstances, where there is a genuine attempt to democratize and lend a tolerant ear to the complaints of the other brother in the political union; where there is sincere willingness to sit down and get involved in serious and fruitful constitutional talks aimed at finding a fair, just and lasting solution to our problems and enshrining them in the great law of our land; under normal circumstances where these conditions prevail then, the Anglophone Cameroonians, in their immense majority, would reject, without hesitation, secession as an option. In this regard the unfortunate confrontation, in Bui on October 1, 2001, between SCNC¹ activists and gendarmes, in which four civilians lost their lives, was regrettable. A timely dialogue would have defused the tension before it ever mounted.

Consequently, it is only fair to expect that the Francophone elite, with whom lies the political leadership, will demonstrate their true patriotism for Cameroon by creating the necessary social and political conditions favourable to the type of genuine dialogue we are talking about. The Anglophones' proposed solution to these problems is contained in the Federal Draft Constitution they submitted to the Technical Committee on the constitution, which ignored it.

However, there seem to be discernible already, signs of things evolving positively; or are we unduly sanguine? On the eve of the 30th anniversary celebration of the Cameroon unitary state, Sunday evening of May 19, 2002, the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), in a French-language TV programme entitled 'Unité Nationale' (National Unity) featuring Mbella Essengue and Ibrahim Cherif as reporters, reviewed thirty years of Cameroon existence as a united country following the scrapping of the federal system in 1972. Talking about 'La Question Anglophone' which inevitably featured in the programme, Maître Happi and former Minister of Transport, Issa Tchiroma, both of them Francophones, openly expressed the need for a dialogue initiated by the incumbency to look into the complaints of the Anglophones in order to obviate any unsavoury eventuality. This programme had been preceded, in the morning of that very Sunday of May 19, 2002, by the prime-time English-language Radio programme 'Cameroon Calling', anchored by Adamu Musa. The highly acclaimed programme, equally dedicated to the 30th anniversary celebration of the unitary state, interviewed a cross-section of enlightened Anglophone Cameroonians, including university lecturers from the University of Buea, the only 'Anglo-Saxon' University in the country. And virtually all the Anglophones interviewed frankly expressed their frustrations with regard to the thirty years of unitary experience. In the words of Clovis Atatah (2002:1) 'Few Anglophones will argue that the institution of the unitary state, after the May 1972 referendum, was the enslavement of Anglophones.'

To us the idea of Francophones and Anglophones being able to freely air their views publicly in a government-controlled Radio and Television with reference to the Anglophone Problem or 'La Question Anglophone' is in itself a positive development. These are, indeed, good signs of the time. We hope that they come to stay and not just to be shelved and revisited only during anniversary celebrations. We hope the political hierarchy will exploit them with a view to seeking a fair and final solution to the Anglophone Problem, a debilitating, bleeding wound otherwise deeply and eternally embedded in the Anglophone psyche. We hope we will go beyond this 'media stage', and move from a general talking ground to a higher talking ground, in search of a common talking ground of reality and effective solution of the problem for the greater unity, stability and progress of our dear Fatherland.

Two organisations, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) and Southern Cameroons People Organisation (SCAPO), have since taken the case of the marginalisation of the Anglophones in Cameroon to the African Commission on Human and People's Rights in Banjul, the Gambia. There they charged the Republic of Cameroon with a series of violations of the articles of the Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. And after a meticulous examination of the charges, the African Commission came out with what is now known as the Banjul Ruling of 13 – 27 May 2009.

The latter consists of a series of recommendations to both the state of the Republic of Cameroon, on the one hand, and the SCNC and SCAPO, on the other, reproduced as follows:

Recommendations

215. The African Commission therefore recommends as follows;

1. That the Respondent State:

- (I) Abolishes all discriminatory practices against people of Northwest and Southwest Cameroon, including equal usage of the English language in business transactions;
- (II) Stops the transfer of accused persons from the Anglophone provinces for trial in the Francophone provinces;
- (III) Ensures that every person facing criminal charges be tried under the language he/she understands. In the alternative, the Respondent State must ensure that interpreters are employed in Courts to avoid jeopardising the rights of accused persons;
- (IV) Locates national projects, equitably throughout the country, including Northwest and Southwest Cameroon, in accordance with economic viability as well as regional balance;
- (V) Pays compensation to companies in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon, which suffered as a result of discriminatory treatment by banks;
- (VI) Enters into constructive dialogue with the Complainants, and in particular, SCNC and

- SCAPO to resolve the constitutional issues, as well as grievances which could threaten national unity; and
- (VII) Reforms the Higher Judicial Council, by ensuring that it is composed of personalities other than the President of the Republic, the Minister of Justice and other members of the Executive Branch.
2. To the Complainants, and SCNC and SCAPO in particular,
- (i) to transform into political parties
 - (ii) to abandon secessionism and engage in constructive dialogue with the Respondent State on the Constitutional issues and grievances.
3. The African Commission places its good offices at the disposal of the parties to mediate an amicable solution and to ensure the effective implementation of the above recommendations.
4. The African Commission requests the parties to report on the implementation of the aforesaid recommendations within 180 days of the adoption of this decision by the AU Assembly.

Done in Banjul, The Gambia at the 45th Ordinary Session, 13 - 27 May 2009.

It is instructive to mention here that following the African Commission's verdict appealing to both the SCNC and the government to seek a solution to the Anglophone Problem through dialogue, the SCNC and SCAPO, according to The Post of December 18, 2009, indicated their willingness to dialogue with the government of 'La Republique' (Mbunwe 2).

The conducive conditions mentioned above will make it possible for solutions to be found to the other non-Anglophone issues raised in the plays. For it would certainly be myopic to confine the subject matter of these plays to the Anglophone Problem alone. Therefore solving the fundamental problem raised in *What God Has Put Asunder*

means more than resolving just an Anglophone matter; it means unravelling an issue that, in some ways, would make for a stronger, a more just and prosperous Cameroon. There is little or nothing in all of Bole Butake's plays indicating that we are dealing essentially with an Anglophone problem; rather, we are talking here of Cameroonian and African socio-political issues. True, with regard to Bate Besong, while the Anglophone Problem is very much evident in *Zombie*, *Beasts of No Nation*, *Great Lepers* and *The Banquet*, it is neither central in *Change Waka* nor in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*; the issue in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* is Cameroonian in particular and African in general. *Black Caps and Red Feathers* has handled essentially a national issue without ignoring the Anglophone Problem.

At this juncture, need we then state the obvious: that the plays treated in this study can be classified as revolutionary dramas? Very plainly they are plays working for a change, indeed a radical change of the status quo. Their authors are committed writers bent on urging social reactions in the hope of producing the greatest good for the greatest majority. According to Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh (1993:107)

Anglophone playwrights see themselves in a role of developing the critical consciousness of their society, of mobilizing people for change through the destruction of the «culture of silence» which has so far subjected them to years of oppression. Their role seems to be that of building the foundation of a new society in which social justice and a sense of communal belonging can prevail.

As we said earlier the ultimate social significance of these works can only be gauged by the effect they have on the consciousness of Cameroonians in general and Anglophone Cameroonians in particular. And if the impact on the Anglophones is anything to go by, one can only say that it is significant indeed. For, together with the buoyant private press, and enlightened political opinion leaders, these radical plays have helped to mould an enlightened, critical Anglophone community. The plays constitute part of the forces that have helped to bring together quarrelling Anglophones for a common cause; some have helped, to some extent, to produce the

All Anglophone Conference: AAC I and AAC II, with their respective declaration and proclamation; in short, they have helped bickering Anglophones to move from battle ground to higher ground in search of common ground. The playwrights, in the words of Edward O. Ako,

Seem to be drawing attention to the fact that they too are Cameroonians, though of the other tongue, and that there ought to be, in fact, there should be, enough room on the banquet table for all. (Ako 2001:22)

After everything, there is inherent danger in writing committed drama, and here we are talking less of the political danger the writers are exposed to, with regard to the barrel of their pen, which is real, than of the artistic danger. For the temptation is great for one, who thinks he is committed, to write a play high in political content but low on artistic propriety. Let us express the danger explicitly in the form of a question raised at the end of Chapter One: Are committed writers of the types we have been discussing not likely to sacrifice technique for sententiousness?

A brief response to this is that, with regard to dramatic technique, we have pointed out an occasional artistic flaw in the works of the writers discussed in this study. It would be foolish to claim that these plays are perfect works of art; for there are hardly any flawless dramas in existence, anyway. However, we have attempted to convey the view that in some of their best works like *What God has Put Asunder*, *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, *Requiem for The Last Kaiser*, *Beasts of No Nation*, *Change Waka and Black Caps and Red Feathers*, these Anglophone playwrights have generally acquitted themselves well. They have handled their subject matter without vitiating their art, stated their matter without minimizing their manner and, therefore, maintained a reasonable balance between content and dramatic technique.

Notes

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Printed by Dreamland Plus,
Bamenda.
- d) African Union
African Commission on Human &
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Executive Council
Fifteenth Ordinary Session
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Sirte, Libya

Annex 4

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Mgwanga (sic) Gumme et al/Cameroon
The Banjul Ruling
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(SCAPO). (n.d.)

Notes on the Playwrights

Victor Epie Ngome 1947 –

Victor Epie Ngome was born on October 10, 1947 in Muabi, a village in the western slope of the Muanenguba ranges of Cameroon. A versatile individual, he excels in almost everything he chooses to do. After reading Agriculture in CCAST Bambili, he later on switched to a different profession, journalism, which led him to the following universities in search of higher academic diplomas: University of Western Ontario, University of London, Michigan State University in Lansing, and University of Yaoundé Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences.

He has held successive posts of responsibility including Head of English Language Broadcasts in Radio Cameroon; Press Attaché for Cameroon Shipping Lines. Deputy Editor-in-Chief of CRTV Radio, and recently Scientific and Cultural Affairs Editor for CRTV Television. He has worked with the BBC African Service in Bush House, London. A composer and a choir-master Victor Epie Ngome has written four other unpublished plays. He heads an NGO concerned with Human rights.

Bole Butake 1947 –

Born on July 28, 1947 in Noni in Bui Division of the North-West Province of Cameroon, Bole Butake attended Sacred Heart College Mankon, Bamenda, CCAST Bambili, the University of Yaoundé, and the University of Leeds. He holds the following academic diplomas: B.A.; M.A. English Literature and a Doctorate from the University of Yaoundé.

An outspoken social and literary critic Butake is now Professor of Theatre Arts in the University of Yaoundé. Working in close collaboration with the University of Yaoundé Theatre and the Flame Players, Butake has taken his plays to jammed theatre halls in the major towns of the Anglophone regions in Cameroon. But above all, his plays have been staged in the capital city of Yaoundé; one of them (*Shoes and Four Men in Arms*) was staged by the Flame Players in the three German cities of Leverkusen, Gelsenkirchen and

Bayreuth where it was well-received. Bole Butake has also published short stories and some poetry. He has done some work with the Baka pigmies.

Bate Besong 1954 – 2007

Bate Besong was born in Calabar (Nigeria) on 8th May 1954 of Cameroonian parentage and educated in St. Bede's College Ashing, Hope Waddell Institute Calabar, University of Calabar, and University of Ibadan. His poetry and criticism have been published in several international journals. He is the 1992 Winner of ANA Literature (Drama) Prize. His publications include *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie* (1986), *Beasts of No Nation* (1990), *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* (1991), *The Banquet* (1994), *Just above Cameroon* (1998) (poetry), and *Change Waka & His Man Sama Boy* (2001).

Bate Besong's imaginative works, polemical essays and public pronouncements reveal him as an intrepid and irrepressible social critic concerned with the Cameroonian commonweal. He was briefly detained in 1991 in Yaoundé shortly after his fiery play *Beasts of No Nation* was premiered. A very popular lecturer with university students because of his out-spoken and daring nature, Bate Besong, PhD, taught Dramatic Literature and Performing Arts in the Department of English at the University of Buea, Cameroon until his death on March 8, 2007.

Nkemngong John Nkengasong 1959 –

Nkemngong John Nkengasong was born in Lewoh Fondom in the South-west Province of Cameroon. An experienced teacher of English language and literature, he was until recently, the President of the South-West Association of Teachers of English (SWATE), and an Assistant Chief Examiner for Advanced Level Literature with the Cameroon G.C.E. Board. A well-known critic and poet, he teaches literature in the Department of English, University of Yaoundé I. A holder of Doctorat de 3^e Cycle and a PhD, Nkengasong is also author of *A Stylistic Approach to Literary Appreciation* (1999); *Across the Mongolo* (2004), *W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot: Myths and Poetics of Modernism* (2005) and *The Widow's Might* (2006); more imaginative works by him are in the pipeline. He is now Associate Professor.

Titles by *Langaa* RPCIG

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Mind Searching
The Disillusioned African
The Convert
Souls Forgotten
Married But Available
Intimate Strangers

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Scribbles from the Den: Essays on Politics and Collective
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Fragmented Melodies

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ICT and Changing Mindsets in Education

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Education of the Deprived is a perceptive socio-artistic examination of the key works of some major writers of Anglophone Cameroon literary drama today. For over two decades now socio-political developments in Cameroon, including the liberalization of the press, have led to an unprecedented proliferation of political, journalistic and imaginative writings. Availing themselves of their new-found freedom of expression, Cameroonians in general are forcefully articulating their views more than even before, and creative writers, in particular, are artistically recording intimate and painful experiences in the on-going endeavour to make sense of the socio-political environment; they are mapping out, through images and symbols, the peculiar contour of the collective Cameroonian soul. What observers have noticed, with regard to Anglophone Cameroon imaginative writing, however, is that there are few significant critical works to match the burgeoning creative literature. While in the 1970s there was a cry concerning the scarcity of imaginative works by Anglophone Cameroonians, the complaint now, at the turn of the 21st century, is that there is a dearth of critical literature capable of catapulting, on to the international literary scene, the Anglophone Cameroon literature being written. This book covers both traditional and modern drama as written by Anglophones, lays bare the technical differences between the two dramatic traditions, and brings out the central themes developed by these committed dramatists.

‘It is an important contribution to (until recently) a badly neglected field.’

Professor Chris Dunton, National University of Lesotho

‘*Education of the Deprived* is most refreshing in its critical muscularity and interpretative horizons. ...lucid and even provocative.’

Bate Besong, University of Buea, Cameroon

Shadrach A. Ambanasom is Associate Professor and Head of the English Department at ENS Annexe Bambili, University of Yaounde 1. His publications with Langaa include *Son of the Native Soil*, and *The Cameroonian Novel of English Expression: An Introduction*.



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